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Making Space for Citizens

Broadening the 'new democratic spaces' for citizen participation

The limits of democratisation strategies which focus only on the formal electoral arena are becoming increasingly clear. In both North and South, interest is now growing in approaches to 'deepening democracy' which seek to extend the range and scope of opportunities for citizen participation. This has led to a proliferation of 'new democratic spaces'. This *IDS Policy Briefing* takes a closer look at examples of these spaces in a number of very different countries. It argues that if they are to avoid becoming just another set of one-size-fits-all models, much more attention needs to be paid to key contextual factors as well as to institutional design. The Briefing concludes with some practical lessons on dealing with the key challenges which 'new democratic spaces' pose for policymakers and for citizen representatives.

Electoral democracy has spread around the world, but citizens in most countries still perceive government as distant and unaccountable. The international development community is becoming aware that without due attention to rights, citizenship and participation in designing and delivering national and local policies, efforts to secure sustainable development risk failure. At the same time, politicians in established democracies are increasingly concerned with the 'democratic deficit', as electoral participation shrinks and voters signal their disenchantment with the political system.

While many international interventions continue to rely on standardised electoral and legal packages imposed through top-down political reform (or even the use of military force), there is increasing doubt as to the validity and effectiveness of these approaches. Interest is turning instead to ways of 'deepening' democracy where formal democratic mechanisms are already well established, and to democratising public decision-making



Grassroots engagement to give feedback and identify priority agendas lends legitimacy

through civil society and citizen participation where they are not.

This is leading to the creation of a host of 'new democratic spaces' whose degree of formality, durability, accountability and scope varies enormously with context. Some are linked to decentralised elected bodies, while others may form part of national consultative processes. Even at the local level, their remit varies greatly: some local co-management initiatives focus on mobilising communities' own resources, while others oversee the allocation of public funds. Only a few are strongly accountable, inclusive and representative, and fewer still go beyond resource management to help shape laws and policies. Nevertheless, taken together they represent an increasingly vibrant new aspect of democracy, and imply new relationships between citizens and their governments. This makes it essential to understand what affects their potential for success in different contexts.

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Key issues

Attempts at 'deepening democracy' have led to a proliferation of councils, committees, panels, public hearings, stakeholder fora and other 'new democratic spaces'. While some spring from efforts to strengthen participation and others emphasise responsiveness on the part of policymakers and service providers, the most successful often combine the two approaches. Their effectiveness will depend on a number of factors including the legal, historical and cultural setting, the extent of conflict, the role of political parties, social movements and NGOs and the availability of human and financial resources.

Making Space for Citizens

Observers have emphasised the importance of enabling factors such as the presence of active, informed and coordinated civil society groups and strong commitment and responsiveness from within government (often associated with the rise to power of leftist political parties). Based on recent experience in a wide variety of countries, this *IDS Policy Briefing* argues that there are other factors which can play a key role, including the legitimacy of citizen representation in these spaces, their ability to foster inclusive deliberation and their links with other spaces within and outside government. Each of these factors depends in turn on the context within which new spaces are created, as well as on the approach taken to their institutional design.

New democratic spaces in practice

Many of the new arenas for citizen-state engagement have arisen from processes of democratic decentralisation. **In India**, for example, the far-reaching *panchayati raj* local governance reforms have created a system of elected authorities down to the village level. In the absence of such national reform programmes, local and regional initiatives to support participation may be promoted by individual 'champions' and political parties. These initiatives can be vulnerable to changes in government, however, and their ability to survive depends both on establishing a solid legal framework and on generating a sense of ownership among citizens.

In many places, new institutions have found themselves competing with existing partici-

pation spaces. The *panchayati raj* authorities in India exist alongside a range of different committees – for watershed management, forestry, health and other concerns – created over decades by government, NGOs and international agencies. Areas of responsibility and lines of accountability among these different bodies are far from clear, undermining the legitimacy of the *panchayati raj* institutions as the main focus of decision-making on local issues. At the same time, traditional 'informal *panchayats*' dominated by older and wealthier men can use their power to block attempts by women and members of scheduled castes to participate in the *panchayati raj* institutions, despite the system of reserved seats for these groups.

In some cases, central government has channelled funding through new local institutions without necessarily devolving more powers to local government. **In the UK**, the Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme has provided extra resources for the country's most deprived areas, with spending coordinated through local partnerships which are required to develop community participation. This has sometimes led to friction with elected councillors who feel threatened by unelected community leaders playing key roles in the new partnerships.

Such tensions reflect disputes over claims to legitimate representation. These disputes can be particularly intense where democratic rules are unclear or in transition, as in many post-conflict or post-authoritarian settings. **In Angola**, for example, municipal

participatory planning fora set up while a shift to elected local government is still under discussion have seen both NGO-sponsored neighbourhood organisations and residents' committees created by the former one-party state putting themselves forward as the legitimate 'representatives of the people'.

Many of the new democratic spaces have been created with the explicit aim of making service providers more accountable, both to citizens and to donor or central government agencies funding the services. **In Bangladesh**, 'health watch committees' set up by an activist NGO with international development agency support encouraged inclusive participation and rights-claiming, but were unable to secure accountability since they lacked a clear legal mandate and decision-making continued to rest with officials in the health service. **In Bolivia**, by contrast, the Law of Popular Participation established citizen oversight committees in each municipality and empowered them to freeze the budget if expenditure departed from what had been originally planned. Even here, however, the effectiveness of these structures has varied according to the ability of citizens' groups to demand accountability.

Another major justification for the creation of new democratic spaces is that they enable more inclusive and effective deliberation over problems and proposals. Unless attention is paid to the quality of the process, however, people can be excluded from discussions even when they are physically present. Technical jargon can leave participants feeling disempowered, as can the choice of language. **In Canada**, a widely praised national consultation about health care reform was only partially successful in incorporating the perspectives of Inuit people, as it did not allow for traditional forms of community-level discussion.

Similarly, **in Uganda** the use of English in local planning meetings has tended to exclude women, who are less likely to speak the language. Although the official basis for the Ugandan national anti-poverty strategy is 'bottom-up participatory planning', centralisation of administrative and political power means that information on local priorities is less likely to flow upwards if it does not fit with the policy directions already established in Kampala. Civil society participation in Ugandan policy debates is dominated by organisations based in the capital, which have little opportunity or motivation to understand the perspectives of the rural poor. This illustrates how the achievements of local-level democratic spaces often depend on decisions made at



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Clarity about a space's mandate and the binding nature of decisions is essential

“ Strong movements and civil society groups have helped to create democratic spaces, but their success depends on the ability to build networks and alliances that include reformers inside government. ”

Learning from Brazil

Experience in Brazil demonstrates that where political will, active civil society and good institutional design combine, dramatic progress can be made towards including poor and marginalised citizens in governance processes. Brazilian innovations in democratic governance are increasingly looked to as models for other parts of the world – but understanding how these innovations have evolved is essential for analysing their wider applicability.

To take the most famous example, *orçamento participativo* (OP) or participatory budgeting is widely associated with the relatively affluent southern city of Porto Alegre, but OP has now been adopted by hundreds of municipalities across Brazil’s diverse regions. In the north-eastern city of Recife, for example, the strength of NGO–community association alliances forged in earlier experiments with democratic city governance have helped participatory budgeting to endure even through periods of conservative rule, despite the pervasive clientelist politics of the region.

Many of Brazil’s participatory and deliberative democratic institutions owe their legitimacy to the 1988 post-military Constitution, which provided for citizen oversight of the new resources transferred to lower levels of government. In the health sector, over 5,000 ‘health councils’ have been set up to guide and monitor the spending channelled through local health secretariats. Despite this strong framework for participation, health councils in many of the poorest municipalities have been hijacked by local governments seeking to rubber-stamp their plans and budgets. In the north-eastern town of Cabo de Santo Agostinho, civil society activists were able to reform the health council and turn it into a vibrant forum for demanding accountability. A crucial contribution to this success was made by progressive administrators within the municipal government, who ensured that the council had the resources and legitimacy to become a viable political institution.

In other areas, Brazil’s ethnic and cultural diversity has posed challenges for the constitutional vision of universal health rights.

The health care system for indigenous peoples provides for community participation in district health councils, but the very different cultural understandings of health among indigenous practitioners and non-indigenous professionals make it hard to shape a common vision. In the Rio Negro region of the Amazon, involvement in the delivery of outsourced health services has tied the indigenous peoples’ movement to a bureaucratic framework of centrally-allocated budgets and top-down targets. An emerging alliance of indigenous leaders, traditional healers and NGO workers is trying to change this, arguing for the right of indigenous people to participate in shaping their health services as well as in managing their delivery.

Indigenous and traditional forms of organisation have helped to shape citizenship and participation in Brazil in other ways, not least through the country’s famed social movements. One of these movements, of poor rural women in the northern state of Maranhão who were seeking to assert their rights of access to the highly-valued *babaçu* palm against the spread of cattle-ranching and land enclosure, began by mobilising in traditional self-help groups known as *mutirões*. They then moved on to non-violent direct action to protect the trees, while simultaneously building alliances with sympathetic politicians and lawyers who helped to pass municipal laws recognising their rights of access.

These examples demonstrate how specific contextual factors have shaped Brazil’s innovations in democratic governance. The enabling legal framework has resulted both from local struggles to enshrine rights in law and from appealing to rights-based provisions in the Constitution – which themselves were the result of social movement struggles during the transition from dictatorship. Strong movements and civil society groups have helped to create democratic spaces, but their success has depended on the ability to build networks and alliances that include reformers inside government.

Source: Case study research from the DFID Brazil / ActionAid Brasil / IDS *Olhar Crítico* project.

other levels, where the extent and nature of participation may be very different.

In settings where there is deep-rooted mistrust between state and citizens, groups may refuse to enter new democratic spaces even when these are designed to be inclusive and transparent. This is exacerbated where there is a history of conflict.

In Mexico, indigenous communities aligned with the *Zapatista* movement have set up ‘autonomous municipalities’ in Chiapas that refuse to recognise state-sponsored institutions. Even when a new reformist state government introduced participation in regional development planning, the

autonomous municipalities refused to engage with it until their wider demands for indigenous rights had been addressed.

Conflict is just one of the important contextual factors that influence the success of new democratic spaces. The legal framework governing citizen participation, the historical and cultural setting, the strength or weakness of political parties and social movements, the background of the individuals and organisations involved, and the availability of human and financial resources all help to determine the form these spaces will take in each case.

Key challenges

For outsiders seeking to support the development of effective new democratic spaces, a key lesson is the value of working both with policymakers and with citizens. Facilitating and brokering connections across the government/society divide can provide a more legitimate and potentially much more effective focus for external intervention than programmes which focus narrowly on government reform or civil society-building. Successful facilitation depends in turn on understanding the specific challenges that policymakers and civil society representatives face as they engage with new democratic spaces.

Challenges for policymakers

- **One size doesn't fit all:** importing a 'best practice' model from elsewhere does not guarantee success – it is vital to think about the local context. This includes identifying existing spaces for participation, since in contexts where there are many such spaces setting up a new institution may not be the right approach.
- **The 'rules of the game' need to be clear:** the absence of an enabling legal framework may make it difficult to integrate a new democratic space with the formal structures of government. Lack of clarity on the space's mandate and the extent to which decisions will be binding can lead to frustrated expectations among participants and loss of credibility.
- **Participation demands different procedures and attitudes:** institutional arrangements and processes will need to be flexible to respond to the information and priorities emerging from participatory processes. As facilitating inclusive participation requires very different qualities from those needed for decisive political leadership and efficient bureaucratic management, officials may need to be encouraged to change their attitudes and behaviour. An important first step is to insist that participation is recognised as a right, not a concession.
- **Participation takes time:** grassroots decision-making often requires much more extended deliberation than a short meeting will permit, and rushed meetings can make inclusive discussion impossible. Training is not a magic bullet, as participation involves a series of learning processes and there is no substitute for experience and the gradual build-up of specialist knowledge.
- **Participation has resource implications:** citizen representatives will need support to meet the costs of travel, communication and technical assistance, if not of their time. This support can be justified by reminding funding agencies that programmes implemented without participation can be very costly, as they run the risk of missing key priorities or failing altogether.

Challenges for citizens and civil society representatives

- **Governments demand a clear interlocutor:** civil society organisations and citizens will often face pressure to mandate a small number of representatives to negotiate on their behalf. While insisting that governments must respect diversity, civil society groups also need to work together to articulate a coherent set of policy positions that can secure broad support among their constituents.
- **Mandates matter:** governments will often challenge the legitimacy of representatives who disagree with the official position. Establishing a clear mandate and demonstrating accountability makes it possible to respond effectively to such challenges.
- **Representation needs to be shared:** heavy demands can be placed on representatives, leaving little time for the activities that formed the basis of their legitimacy in the first place. Representatives often acquire valuable political skills and technical knowledge, but unless this learning is shared there is a risk that its concentration in a few key individuals will change the internal balance of power of the groups they are representing.
- **Links with other spaces are vital:** grassroots engagement to give feedback and identify priority agendas is essential. Networking and alliance-building can help mobilise support for these agendas both inside and outside the official spaces.
- **Engagement should be a strategic choice:** there are costs as well as benefits in participating. When invited to enter new democratic spaces, individuals and organisations should carry out a 'political risk analysis' to identify dangers as well as opportunities. Civil society groups need to ensure that they do not devote all their energy to local participation at the expense of working strategically to bring about wider change

Further reading

Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan Coelho (eds) (2006) *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, London: Zed Books

John Gaventa (2004) 'Strengthening Participatory Approaches to Local Governance: Learning the Lessons from Abroad' *National Civic Review* 93:4

Rosemary McGee (2003) *Legal Frameworks for Citizen Participation: Synthesis Report*. Brighton: LogoLink
www.ids.ac.uk/logolink/resources/legalframewks.htm

Other resources

Participation.Net Topic Guide on New Democratic Spaces:
<http://community.eldis.org/pnet/>

Credits

This briefing was written by Alex Shankland, with inputs from Andrea Cornwall, Sue Fleming, John Gaventa, Rose Marie Nierras and Vera Schattan Coelho. It draws on the work of the Citizenship DRC, Logolink, the IDS Participation Group, and the DFID-funded *Olhar Critico* project, co-ordinated by Jorge Romano of ActionAid Brazil. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or partner institutions.

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