

Towards transformative local participatory governance

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The South African constitution affirms the right of public involvement in legislative and development policy processes. Institutions of representative democracy are required to be complemented by participatory fora at all levels, in which non-state actors could directly participate in public policy engagements.

As a result, both national and local level participatory forums were established to facilitate public participation in development policy debates. This includes corporatist institutions, such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) were given representation through the establishment of a fourth chamber, the development chamber¹, and local level participatory mechanisms, such as ward committees and izimbizos.

These are “invited” spaces designed for public engagement in governance, rather than simply as instruments for local development and, as such, primarily implementation-focused. They offer an important vehicle through which development interventions can support more transformative participation. ‘Invited’ spaces take a variety of forms. They might be simply constructed opportunities for ‘the people’, or their representatives, to come together with those who represent public authorities. Or they might involve a more heterogeneous set of actors – civil society, private sector, trade unions, etc. Some of them are transient; others are more durable, regularized institutions that take the shape of, for example, councils, committees, forums, advisory bodies, etc.²

However, simply creating new institutional arrangements for participatory governance will not necessarily be more inclusive and transformative. Rather, much will depend on the how these spaces are created, who populates them, how voice and agency are exercised in them and the nature of the power relations which surround and imbue these potentially democratic spaces. Understanding their production, the actors, policies and interests giving rise to them are critical to making sense of their democratic potential.

In this paper, I explore how these dynamics impinge on the emergence of spaces for citizen involvement in local participatory governance, and proffer specific entry points for realizing transformative participation at the local level. I pay particular attention to the type of participation offered by ward committees, how citizens participate and how power is constituted in them. The paper is structured as follows: I begin with an exploration of space, place and power, drawing on the work of theorists of power and space. I go on to assess the

¹ The other three chambers include the Labour Market, Public Finance and Monetary Policy, and Trade and Industry Chambers -in which only labour, government, and business are represented – www.nedlac.org.za

² Cornwall, A. (2004) Spaces for transformation? reflections on issues of power and difference in participation in development, in: Hickey, S. & Mohan, G. (2004) ‘Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation’, pp. 75 – 89.

role and participatory practices of ward committees and highlight salient entry points for realizing transformative participation at the local level.

Contextualising transformative participation

Before we can peer into the analysis of space, it is important to consider views about the concept of participation to illuminating the paper's approach to space-making for transformative participation. The concept of participation has come under increasing criticism in recent times for being political ambiguous and definitionally vague, lacking a coherent theory that seeks to explain and articulate the role of agency in development processes. This explains the ideological malleability that beset participation in practice whereby it is expected to perform a wide range of functions for differing ideologies and political projects. Participation has historically been used both to enable ordinary people to gain agency and as a means of maintaining relations of rule. However, in the hands of the development industry, the political ambiguity has been functional to the preservation of the status quo.³

Participation essentially concerns the exercise of popular agency in relation to development, and has recently been scaled up from projects to involvement in development policy and practice. The proper objective of participation, according to Hickey and Mohan (2004), is to ensure the 'transformation' of existing development practice and, more radically, the social relations, institutional practices and capacities gaps which cause social exclusion.⁴

The cardinal challenge is to politically relocate participation and so rescue its transformative potential. This involves aligning participation to a (socialist-inspired) political project of social justice, articulated with a notion of citizenship, and engage with development as a natural process of social change rather than in the form of specific interventions. The notion of citizenship captures a broader agenda for participation, whereby the social and political agendas of participation and good governance have increasingly converged⁵, countering criticism that participation has not sufficiently engaged with issues of power and governance. Citizenship participation occurs within multiple and overlapping political communities, including the local, national, regional and global levels.

Conceptualising space and power

Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises space as a social product, which is not simply "there", a neutral container waiting to be filled, but is a dynamic, humanly constructed means of control and hence domination of power.⁶ Hence, the construction of space is considered inherent to power, and could either be used by citizens for meaningful engagement in shaping public policy debates, or simply serve as pseudo-democratic instruments through which authorities legitimize already-taken policy decisions.

³ Leal, P. Alejandro (2007) Participation: the ascendancy of a buzzword in the neo-liberal era, in: *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, Nos. 4 – 5, August 2007.

⁴ Hickey, S. & Mohan, G. (2004) Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation, *exploring new approaches to participation in development*, pp. 13

⁵ Hickey & Mohan et al, pp. 66.

⁶ Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The production of space* (London: Verso)

An important rationale for space-making is that it creates opportunities for citizen participation in development policy and practice where there was previously none, or enlarges existing spaces where there were previously limited opportunities for public involvement, allowing people to occupy spaces that were previously denied, and so creating new opportunities for public involvement in governance.

However, much depends on who these spaces were created for, and in whose interests and with what terms of engagement. Cornwall (2002) sees space-making in terms of a “continuum of spaces” involving spaces chosen, fashioned and claimed by those at the margins (organic spaces), and spaces into which those considered marginal are invited (invited spaces). These spaces exist in a dynamic relationship in that whatever happens in the one influences the other. Similarly, power, experiences and capacities gained in one space, can be used to enter and affect other spaces.⁷

The concern with how and by whom spaces for participation are shaped intersects with debates about the places and arenas where critical social, political and economic power resides. One of the key arguments against participation relates to its obsession with the ‘local’ as opposed to wider structures of injustice and oppression. The criticism goes that approaches to participation tend to treat the ‘local’ and ‘community’ as self-evident and unproblematic social categories.⁸ The ‘community’ participatory approach tends to ignore or treats as aberrations the differences within ‘communities’. Assuming uniformity and equality when reality is diverse and unequal, the ‘community’ approach hears those whose dominance enables them to be heard and entrenches exclusionary patterns by silencing many voices in order to hear some.⁹

Thus, the challenge is to build multi-scaled strategies for participation which connect local actors with power-holders in national and global forums and allow for participatory experiences and influences to be channeled from one level to the other. However, the challenge is also about promoting democratic and accountable vertical links across actors and spaces for participation at each level.

Equally important to questions about ‘how’ and ‘who’ shape spaces for participation is the understanding of how participants are being perceived in them – as clients, consumers, beneficiaries or citizens. The way people are perceived influences what they say, and how and whether they are heard. The notion of citizenship in active terms offers a strategic means by which transformative forms of participation can be realized. It occurs within multiple and overlapping political communities from the local to the global level.

Citizenship has traditionally been cast in liberal terms, as individual legal equality accompanied by a set of rights and responsibilities and bestowed by a state on its citizens. Newer – more active- approaches aim to bridge the gap between citizens and the state by recasting citizenship as practices rather than as given. In terms of active citizenship people adhere to decisions and share responsibilities precisely because they have participated in the

⁷Cornwall et al, pp. 78

⁸ Hickey and Mohan et al, pp. 17

⁹ Friedman, S. (2005) On whose terms? Participatory Governance and Citizen Action in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Paper for International Institute of Labour Studies Workshop, 9 – 10 December 2005.

discussions rather than being “bound” or obliged by law. In this way, a more active notion of citizenship recognises the agency of citizens as ‘makers and shapers’ rather than as ‘users and choosers’ of interventions or services designed by others¹⁰, countering the tendency for certain agents of participatory development to treat participation as a technical method of project work rather than as a political methodology of empowerment.

Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents.¹¹ Meanwhile, if rights and citizenship are attained through agency, not simply bestowed from above by power-holders, then the right to participate – exercising existing rights – also implies making new rights/demands or simply strengthening existing rights/demands. Furthermore, while the notion of citizenship always included political participation [through the ballot box]; extending this to encompass participation in social and economic life politicizes social rights through recasting citizens as their active creators. People will thus be able to realize their rights to socio-economic services having participated in decision making processes around their provision.

Thus, two formulations of citizenship can be deduced from the above conception, namely, to be a citizen or to act as a citizen. To be a citizen in the legal and sociological sense means the enjoyment of the rights of citizenship necessary for agency and social and political participation. To act as a citizen involves fulfilling the full potential of the status of being a citizen. Those who do not fulfill that potential status do not cease to be citizens.

But, promoting a more active notion of citizenship ‘alone’ would not necessarily lead to more pro-democratic outcomes in the absence of developing the pre-conditions for a more inclusive system of participatory governance. This include awareness building on rights and citizenship, building and strengthening civil associations and social movements engaged in governance issues, both at the local, national and global levels. Meanwhile, these mechanisms need to be seen along a continuum, ranging from strengthening voice on the one hand, while also strengthening receptivity to voices by power-holders and bureaucracies on the other. Hence, work is required on both sides of the equation to developing both ‘participatory democracy’ characteristic of a strong, active and engaged citizenship and ‘responsive government’, which is accountable, sensitive and open to the needs and preferences of its citizens.

As we examine the relationship between space, voice and agency, we must also examine the dynamics of power and differences that shape the inclusiveness of participation in these spaces for participation. Foucault (1984) argues that ‘space is fundamental in any exercise of power’¹²; making available, claiming and taking up spaces needs to be seen, then, as acts of power. Spaces come to be defined by those who are invited into them, as well as those who are doing the inviting. People move regularly between domains of association, and the way in which they might be perceived in some might be strikingly different to how they are

¹⁰ Gaventa, J. (2004) Towards participatory governance: assessing the transformative possibilities, in: Hickey & Mohan et al, pp.25

¹¹ Hickey & Mohan et al

¹² Foucault, M. (1984) ‘Space, Knowledge and Power, in: P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books), pp. 239 – 56

perceived in others, with implications for the extent to which they will be able to influence and act as agents in different spaces. For example, someone who is voluble in one space might be silenced in another; someone who is respected in one space might be patronized and even derided in another. Hence, the impingement of power relations on different spaces for participation across different arenas at different levels conditions the possibilities for agency and voice.

According to Foucault, spaces in which citizens are invited to participate, as well as those they create themselves, are never neutral. Infused with existing relations of power, interactions within them may come to reproduce rather than challenge existing hierarchies and inequalities. Yet the 'strategic reversibility' of power relations, according to Foucault, means that such governmental practices are always sites of resistance for government is not a monolith and the project of 'governmentality' is a contested enterprise, always producing the possibilities for subversion, appropriation and reconstitution.¹³ From this perspective, the relationship between space and power could work to put boundaries on participation, and to exclude certain actors or views from entering spaces for participation in the first place, or in its more insidious form, power could be internalized in terms of the self-esteem and identities of participants, such that voices in visible places are but echoes of what power-holders who shaped these spaces want to hear. But, it could also lead to the creation of countervailing power expressed through a range of other coexisting spaces for participation, countering the powerful interests of power-holders and other dominant social forces in closed and invited spaces. Hence, as Fung and Wright (2001) point out, 'where countervailing power is weak or non-existent, the rules of collaboration are likely to favour entrenched, previously organised or concentrated interests.'¹⁴

Finally, conceptualising the emergences of space for citizen involvement in participatory governance in terms of the relationship between power, space, and place, makes the question of representation – of who speaks for whom across the intersections of space and place, and on what basis - a critical one. The character of institutional channels available within political systems, and of resources required to participate at ever high levels means that much of what is considered 'participatory' is more a process whereby large numbers of people are represented by a relatively small group of participants. Representation is primarily about the organised intersection of leaders rather than members per se.¹⁵

Debates about representation are increasingly important, especially as far as it relates to the 'cost of participation' for poor and marginalised groupings, who willingly hand over this right to others. According to Hickey and Mohan (2004) it is important to consider the synergies and tensions between the project that underpins moves towards greater participation and the wider project of democratisation, with its primary focus on representative forms of democracy.¹⁶ Gaventa (2006) warns of the perils of 'democratic elitism', which is premised on a concern for protecting democracy from *too* much

¹³ Foucault et al

¹⁴ Fung, A. & E. Olin Wright (2001) 'Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance', in: *Politics and Society*, Vol. 29, pp. 5- 41

¹⁵ Hickey and Mohan et al, pp.19

¹⁶ Hickey and Mohan et al, pp. 19

participation by ill-equipped masses.¹⁷ According to Avritzer (2002), this approach reduces the scope of political participation from ‘mobilisation’ to ‘voting’ and leaves behind the idea of a search for consensus of the ‘public good’.¹⁸

Hence, the rationale for wider participation is often made on the basis that electoral representation offers a particularly limited form of democracy, that party systems often excludes the poor and that procedural democracy lacks the substance of a broader set of participatory engagements. For Gaventa (2004) developing more direct and empowered forms of participation can lead to both democracy-building and pro-poor development outcomes.¹⁹

The above body of analysis has explored how spaces for participation are created, the different places/arenas where these spaces are located, and how power relations permeate them. Each of these continuums of power, place and space exists in relationship to each others, and affects the complex dynamics of participatory governance in any given context. Understanding spaces for citizens’ involvement in development policy debates in this way, the following section now examines how these dynamics impinge on ward committee participation. The primary objective of our enquiry is to establish the type of participation offered by ward committees.

The rationale for community / public participation in local governance

Section 152 (1) of the Constitution enjoins local governments ‘to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government’.²⁰ The objective here is to enhance community / public participation in local governance. The most popular meaning attached to this constitutional clause is that local authorities need to facilitate consultation with their communities. However, the meaning of consultation is fraught with vagueness and ambiguities. Local power-holders often emphasise ‘consultation’ as a legal and procedural requirement, treating its form and content as secondary issues. Another dilemma dogging the consultation form of participation is that its beginning– and -ending points are not always clearly defined which often opens it to manipulation by local-power-holders.

But a more serious shortcoming of consultation is that it lacks the power to insure that the views of grassroots citizens would indeed be heeded by those in power. When participation is restricted to this level, there is often no follow-through, no “muscle”, hence no assurance of changing the status quo.

Community participation more widely termed public participation is seen as pivotal to enhancing local democracy. Different reasons are posited to motivate its importance. It is argued that it provides an equal opportunity to influence the decision-making processes and

¹⁷ Gaventa, J (2006) Triumph, Deficit or Contestation? Deepening the ‘Deepening Democracy’ Debate, IDS Working Paper 264, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, pp.13

¹⁸ Avritzer, L. (2002) Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America, Princeton: Princeton University Press

¹⁹ Gaventa et al, pp.25

²⁰ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

ensures that local authorities are sensitive to the needs of the people.²¹ Community participation is considered crucial in multi-dimensional development processes. This resonates with the objective of ensuring that communities own the process of development. In the South African context, participatory governance is seen as the mechanism through which to realize community / public participation. It is thus important to first clarify the purpose of participatory governance before entering the discussion on ward committees.

The purpose of participatory governance

‘Participatory governance’ is described as ‘a regulatory framework in which the task of running public affairs is not solely entrusted to government and the public administration, but involves co-operation between state institutions and civil society groups.’²² In the South African context, one of the important rationales advanced for participatory governance is that it broadens and deepens democracy by expanding the range of citizens engaged in making or influencing government decisions. A stated or an implied rationale is that democracy is, in essence, an expression of popular sovereignty in which all members of the political community are entitled to an equal say in public affairs.²³

However, a legitimate criticism of this rationale is that it tends to confuse the need to accommodate the organised who are capable of ‘delivering’ constituencies with the desire to deepen democracy. Thus, while the rhetoric and normative framework in which participation is pursued stresses ‘deepening democracy’, the choice of participants and the expectations placed on processes suggest assumptions more appropriate to a corporate mechanism.²⁴

There are three substantive aspects to the innovation of participatory governance at a local level: the redefinition of the municipality, requirements for public participation and ward committees. Popular opinion suggests that the requirements for community / public participation in local government processes are properly being undercut by one structural element of participatory governance: ward committees.

The role and participatory practices of ward committees

The establishment of ward committees is provided for in Chapter 4 of the Municipal Structures Act (1998). According to the Act, ward committees could be established in each ward of a Category A or Category B municipality, if the municipality so chooses, though of late government has been suggesting that the ward committee system be made compulsory for all municipalities.²⁵

Other key aspects of legislations include the Municipal Systems Act (2000), which requires of municipalities to establish appropriate mechanisms and procedures to enable community participation in municipal affairs, and the Municipal Planning and Performance Regulations

²¹ Party Politics, Elite Accountability and Public Participation: Ward Committee Politics in the Msunduzi Municipality: CHORUS (French – South African) Project 2006:

²² Friedman et al

²³ Friedman et al

²⁴ Friedman et al

²⁵ Party Politics, Elite Accountability and Public Participation: Ward Committee Politics in the Msunduzi Municipality: CHORUS (French – South African) Project 2006, pp.2

(2001), which reinforces the provision for community participation of the Systems Act, but beyond that, it also adjures municipalities to establish alternative forums where no municipal structures for community / public participation exist. These forums are expected to be representative and enhance community participation in IDP processes.

Ward committees are defined as important communicative channels for informing municipalities about the needs, preferences and problems of their communities. They are mandated to facilitate substantive grass roots participation in the development processes of municipalities, including the Integrated Development Planning (IDP), budgeting and municipal performance management processes. They are meant to be non-partisan and advance the interests of the ward collectively.

Following the Community Participation Conference of 2005, the Minister of Provincial and Local Government published a Notice entitled 'Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Municipal Ward Committees. The guidelines define a limited advisory role for ward committees without any direct participation in decision-making processes.

Empirical evidence of ward committee participatory practices suggests a latent discord between the rhetorical zeal for participation and what actually happens in practice. In sum, ward committees have not acted to offer grassroots citizens an effective say in policy making processes at the local level. Broadly, key arguments against ward committee participation relate to concerns about

- Agency and voice,
- autonomy and power;
- party political influences; and
- the skills and capacity of ward councilors

A study conducted on citizens participation by the Steven Friedman (2005) in the City of Johannesburg's Integrated Development Plan consultative process offers a compelling illustration of the limited/exclusionary form of grassroots citizen participation extended by ward committees. According to the findings of the study, whilst the Greater Johannesburg Metro Council (GJMC) insisted that consultation is not simply a legal requirement, it emerged that a strategic agenda and 'indicative budget allocations' were agreed some five months before the consultation process. Citizens were thus expected to comment on an IDP which was largely a *fait accompli*.²⁶ Nor were they directly invited to comment on the plan; time constraints ensured that not even the metropolis's 109 ward committees learned of the content of the draft plan. Instead, ward councilors were given the responsibility 'of cascading the information to their committees and communities...'²⁷

According to Friedman (2005), where the council did allow limited opportunities for participation, these were extended to organised, more affluent, groups. He argues that it is difficult to see how grassroots citizens could have participated to any degree in these exercises. Judging from the issues that dominated the GJMC's IDP consultative process, e.g. debt management, safety standards in buildings, protection from crime, concerns over tariff

²⁶ Friedman et al

²⁷ Friedman et al

increases, it's clear that the dominant voices in the IDP consultation processes are mostly those of better resourced groups who participate in public policy debates. Meanwhile, according to Friedman, no evidence exists that the briefing to councilors went beyond ward committees which are chosen by councilors, not elected by residents.²⁸

Findings of the operations of ward committees in the Msunduzi municipality in KZN illustrate how those in power determine the terms of participation in ward committees and the lack of substantive grassroots citizenry influence in the form and content of ward committee participation. According to the evidence, the functioning of ward committees is dependent on ward councilors. This is because they are responsible for scheduling meetings, the agenda, the information required by committee members and the type of information the council requires from ward committees.²⁹ This comports with evidence by Friedman (2005) of the GJMC IDP consultative process, stating that two thirds of councils reported that their ward committees had 'no powers' and only 44% confirmed that ward councilors tabled reports on issues raised by ward committees; less than half – 47% - claimed that committees affect council decisions.³⁰

The Msunduzi case study also reveals the extent of party political influence in the agenda and outcomes of ward committee participatory processes, undermining the voice and agency of the broader grassroots citizenry – civil society groupings and citizens - who are not members of political parties. The evidence shows that where ward committees are functional they remain under the influence of the local party branch – the party remains the dominant player. In this way, party political influence not only impinges on the autonomy of ward committees, but also serves to ostracize a broader repertoire of different voices. Partisan ward committees dominated by party political agendas are also less likely to hold party elites and those in power accountable, and are often used to simply endorse the decisions/positions of municipalities.

A case study of ward committees in the Rustenburg municipality indicates that grassroots participants are often ill-equipped to meaningfully participate in the technical issues engulfing ward committee discussions. This is because grassroots communities often lack the information and sufficient understanding of the policy issues that are debated in ward committees.³¹ The findings of the Msunduzi case study support this observation. For example, it was found that training materials were more relevant and better suited for municipal officials and ward councilors than for the broader –mostly grassroots- participants of ward committees.

The choice of language and medium that is used for advertising ward committee meetings also impinges on the inclusivity of ward committee participatory processes. The GJMC case study illustrates how language could become inimical to substantive grassroots participation. It was found that meetings were mainly advertised in English and Afrikaans newspapers,

²⁸ Friedman et al

²⁹ Party Politics, Elite Accountability and Public Participation: Ward Committee Politics in the Msunduzi Municipality: CHORUS (French – South African) Project 2006, pp. 7

³⁰ Friedman et al

³¹ The Role of Ward Committees in Enhancing Public Participation in Rustenburg Municipality: A critical evaluation: Citizen Leadership Unit, IDASA (2006)

thus, ostracizing most of the grassroots poor, who generally possess low literacy levels and are unfamiliar with English or Afrikaans.

Meanwhile, local participatory processes that are tied to highly technical development interventions tend to discard the experiential and human knowledge of grassroots citizens and therefore undercut their ability to exercise voice and agency in development policy debates. Friedman (2005), for example, argues that documents produced by city planners talk of a 'participatory process aimed at empowering the poor and marginalised.' But what does the word 'empowering' - ubiquitous in contemporary South Africa - mean? It could simply be intended in a procedural, facilitative, sense: a process may bestow on people the formal power to participate. But it may also imply that power is, somehow, a capacity which can be transferred from those who have it to those who do not by some sort of technical process; people lack power unless it is bestowed upon them by some official process. This implies that the 'poor and marginalised' can attain power only if the technicians find the appropriate 'participatory process' to grant it. But the 'power' bestowed in this way is far more likely to try to remake the poor in the planners' image than to open the frontiers of choice. City documents thus display great enthusiasm for 'new' management techniques.³² It is these, not responsiveness to citizens, which are considered the key to effectiveness. The presumed ability of the officials and technicians in council offices to 'deliver' to a grateful citizenry continues to be assumed.

The above sample of empirical evidence has illustrated how the dynamics of space and power impinge on the ability of ward committees to affect grassroots citizens' participation. To summarise the evidence, the following three conclusions can be drawn:

- Participation in ward committees is predicated on a formal – legalistic understanding of participation, which sees those who participate as beneficiaries or clients of government's development interventions. It is based on a technical approach to participation, which fails to sufficiently engage with issues of power and politics – people are not part of the actual decision-making processes as decision-making power resides somewhere else.
- Ward committee participation mainly benefits organised and well resourced social groupings and local party political actors, who don't need any recourse to access local power-holders, excluding a broader repertoire of unorganized – mainly poor - voices.
- In this way, power relations in ward communities are shaped by powerful interests, including party political actors, organised groupings and ward councilors/power-holders. Ward councilors, for example, - colluding with local party political actors - determine the agenda and outcomes of ward committee participatory processes.

In sum, the South African approach to local participatory governance embodied by ward committees does not offer a transformative form of participation that is inclusive and based on the active political agency of grass roots citizens. The following section will highlight some salient entry points for realizing transformative participation at the local level.

³² Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC) *iGoli Online* www.joburg.org.za 2002

Entry points for realizing transformative participation

1. It is important to think of local participatory governance in a ‘continuum of spaces’, including closed spaces – where decisions are made by a specific set of actors behind closed doors, e.g. *Municipalities*, etc, invited spaces - into which communities are invited to participate, e.g. *Ward Committees, Public Forums, Citizen Assemblies*, etc and claimed or created spaces – which are created autonomously by communities, e.g. *Residents Associations, Concerned Groups*, etc. These spaces exist in dynamic relationship to one another in that what happens in one influences the others. For example, the spaces created by communities could be used to share experiences, formulate demands, demonstrate resistance and challenge power-holders and to develop strategies to engage power-holders in other spaces. Thus, serving as important instruments for exercising countervailing power. From this perspective, the transformative potential of spaces for local participatory governance like ward committees must always be assessed in relationship to the other spaces which surround them.

2. Local participatory approaches must be linked to participation at other levels, e.g. national, regional and international levels. This is because local realities are invariably influenced by what happens at other levels. This requires building multi-scaled strategies for exercising agency through, for example, establishing alliances / linkages / networks between local, regional and international civil society groupings, in order to channel experiences, information and demands across different arenas. For example, in cases where local power-holders are indifferent to the demands and interests of grassroots citizens, local civil society groupings can use spaces at different levels to challenge their local governments. However, the challenge is not only to build *vertical links* across different levels, but also to promote democratic and accountable *vertical links* across actors and institutions at each level.

3. We need to promote a more active notion of citizenship, one that not only recognises people’s legal right to participation (voting rights), but sees them as the makers and shapers of the affairs of their communities through active participation in development policy and decision-making processes. A more active notion of citizenship broadens the juridical meaning of ‘political participation’ that relies on legal definitions concerning the status of citizens and includes issues of power and politics. It encompasses socio-economic rights, meaning that people can either claim new rights – housing, land, work, etc – or struggle to expand and maintain existing rights. People can thus claim citizenship ‘from below’, rather than waiting for it to be conferred ‘from above’. In sum, the notion of active citizenship broadens the agenda of participation in that it includes socio-political rights, grounding participation in the material well-being of people, and extends participation to levels of decision-making.

4. But, realizing active citizenship rests on strategies to inform people about their rights to participation and about the policies and processes which they are participating in. Here civil society advocacy groupings have an important role to play. For example, through establishing advocacy networks and working with grassroots movements, these groupings can use their resources and expertise to inform grassroots communities of the dynamics and positions encapsulating development policy debates. However, grassroots citizens must be allowed scope to foreground their own experiential and human knowledge in these policy debates.

5. Finally, participatory processes must pay more attention to issues of differences, and the challenge of inclusion – who participates on behalf of who. Strategies are needed to allow grassroots citizens to articulate their own perspectives and experiences – people should be free to express themselves in a vernacular of their choice. Most importantly, participation should be on People’s Terms. For example, grass roots citizens must be able to choose their own spaces for participation and be able to influence the agenda and outcomes of these spaces.

Conclusion

This short paper tried to distil key dynamics relating to the politics of participation. A small sample of case study material on local participatory processes was used to verify the paper’s conceptual assumptions. Based on conclusions drawn, key entry points were proffered to stimulating discourse and thought amongst researchers, analysts, activists and others at the coalface of debates about participation and democracy, about how to realize the transformative potential of local spaces for participation. However, more evidence is required about how local spaces for citizens engagement work, for whom, and with what development outcomes. We also need to learn far more about how people understand their participation in these spaces, the instruments they use to hold their representatives accountable and other modes of participation that grass roots citizens use to exercise voice.

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