



Civil Society, Community Participation and Empowerment in the Era of Globalization

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The Early Days

In the early days of the second wave of the women's movement, we had our own stories of community participatory development. In 1978 we knew of Lois Gibbs and the women of the Love Canal region of New York whose houses were built on twenty thousand tons of toxic waste; the entire neighbourhood was sick. Gibbs identified that men, women, and children in the area suffered from many conditions—cancer, miscarriages, stillbirths, birth defects, and urinary tract diseases. She collected the evidence. Through petitions, public meetings and use of the media, the Love Canal community took on the School Board, the State and Federal governments, and finally the President. They were rehoused and compensated, and left a legacy to the USA in the form of the Environmental Protection Agency.¹

Similarly, the work of Maria Mies and her students in the early 1980s in Cologne introduced us to 'action research'. Their research involved women across the city in the collection of evidence of domestic violence sufficient to convince the police and city councillors of the urgent need for the first shelters for battered women.

As those who followed in this wave were to find while working for the first women's health clinics, for the examination of victims of sexual assault by women police officers and doctors, for rape crisis centres, for breastfeeding in public places, and for workplaces free from sexual harassment and stereotyping in employment, community participation of women was

necessary because there were no statistics kept. There was no reputable research available, no empirical, statistically-valid 'evidence' to back-up policy makers when they wanted to address these needs with public funds.

In myriad ways, the women of my generation collected our own evidence from our sisters, demonstrating that the experts on these subjects were not those with degrees, bureaucratic appointments or clinical coats. The 'experts' were those who had lived through the experiences. We collected narratives and photographs, held focus groups and demonstrations, engaged in street theatre and conducted key informant interviews with powerful people. We thought locally and acted globally, as we knew that these issues were challenges engaged by a worldwide women's movement. We were most certainly 'civil society' activists, but we were seldom invited to engage in dialogue with powerbrokers. We frequently needed to be 'uncivil' to be heard.

Because I have 'grown up' through this wave of the feminist movement and learned the stories of those who went before, I believe it is simply impossible to claim that "the rise of transnational civil society – NGOs linked across borders in issues-based advocacy networks – [is] an important development in the international context."² Such networks might well work with more speed in the 21st century, but I have stood in the library archives of Ishikawa Fusae (feminist, journalist, union activist, and independent senator) in Tokyo, Japan, and examined letters and magazines she was receiving from suffrage leaders in New Zealand about the first women elected as mayors

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and councillors in local government elections there, and also her correspondence with Jeanette Rankin, the first woman elected to the United States Congress in 1917. I saw archived correspondence from women throughout the Pacific congratulating Ishkawa Fusae on establishing the first union for women in Japan. They wrote by hand or antique typewriter, and travelled to international feminist gatherings by ship, yet their language and their issues have resonance in our era of notebook computers and business class air travel.

Thus for many women there is nothing new in ‘transnational civil society’. For generations now, we women would have described our methods as transparent, community-based, empowering and political. We are doing what women have always had to do.

The Emergence of ‘Participation’ in the Development Sector

Academic social scientists were first influenced by the work of Paulo Freire in the 1960s.³ He outlined a philosophy of actively involving the poor in critically analyzing their social situation, creating from this the potential to challenge and transform their environments. From this strand of thought evolved participatory action research. This was described as the process when “self conscious people, those who are currently poor and oppressed, will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process others may play a catalytic role but will not dominate.”⁴ Not a great deal of feminist analysis informed this work though feminist writers could easily adopt Freire’s approach, since the herstory of women has been redolent with such examples.

Throughout the same period Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) was emerging. The polite explanation for its emergence was that the assessment methods being used were too

lengthy; the reality was that they were laughable. Mostly designed in western donor capitals, the assessments operated as if: a) there was data available across a wide sectoral field, and b) that it was remotely reliable. In my experience nothing much – including GDP figures, census of population data, literacy rates, numbers of women involved in agriculture, numbers of men or women working in the informal sector, and numbers of children enrolled in or attending schools – could be believed. In the absence of data, officials just made it up.

In addition, national counterparts I worked with ‘elevated plagiarism to an art form’ (as a good Filipina friend described it). Ironically, they stole from Western academic books about their own country. In many countries the idea that a national counterpart, even on an agricultural project, might actually have to travel to areas beyond a comfortable day trip from the office, was anathema to them. And the prospect that pre-literate rural people might actually know more than the Western experts about water volumes, pelagic species in the river for a dam or irrigation project, or about the flora and fauna of forested areas, was completely out of the question.

Somehow more reliable insights and information had to be brought to the growing litany of development disasters. When Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) emerged in the late 1970s, Robert Chambers’ work was often cited.⁵ Initially PRA used the local people (the experts) as repositories of information, but did not engage them in project feasibility, implementation, or monitoring and evaluation. In fact, those using PRA had usually predetermined the parameters of the project and did not bother to ask what the priorities for development might actually be. But during this period there was an evolution of the research methods themselves: social mapping, transect walks, scoring and ranking with seeds, stones or sticks, and institutional diagramming emerged. The ‘lab rat’ approach, backed by technology, was failing. Communities were different from each other, had different histories/herstories, different

power dynamics, different ways of working with, and uses for, their natural environments. And they were the experts on all of this information. Field methods evolved to reflect this reality, and to change the dynamic of the research.

By 1997 Chambers' work was evolving a more detailed and sophisticated power analysis. PRA was not just about gathering more textured information. It meant giving up control and power, and this was very threatening to the western 'experts' in the field. National bureaucrats also thought it completely out of the question.

What They Don't Tell You about Development

I have learnt from my experiences over the years that there are many vital reasons to be engaged in participatory development, most of which are usually not mentioned in the text books. Not all countries fall into each of the following categories, and some fall into one or two and not others, but I can certainly identify some that exemplify each category.

When the government regularly says yes to any project offered: This usually means that communities are not consulted about what their priorities are at any stage. The project priority is often to create a dependency on donor country producers, for materials, machinery, infrastructure development, vehicles, or computer hardware and software, for example. In this way, a great percentage of the donor package is actually spent on the donor's own experts and production. This approach presents major on-going capability challenges from the project's inception because dependency, not capacity-building, is the silent agenda. In the Asian region for example, I have frequently named certain projects of the Japanese government's development agency, JICA, as demonstrative of this approach. The spin-off for the recipient minister, or the project leader's national counterpart, is another driver and vehicle at the family's disposal.

When the recipient government refuses to have cross-sectoral focal points: This might happen when you are engaged in an eco-tourism development on off-shore islands, for example. You sign the project agree-

ment only with the Minister of Tourism, and it is the Ministry of Tourism that gets the four-wheel drives, mobile phones, computer packages, gets to appoint the national counterparts to be paid in USD, and hosts all of the training. You know you will need plenty of cooperation from the Ministry of Environment or Conservation, but there is nothing in it for them and you will not get the information you need from them at all. The same will happen inside the Ministry of Transport, which is in charge of policy in respect of air or sea transport to the islands; you can just whistle in the wind for any assistance you may require.

When the bureaucrats in the public service were at university or in the civil service during a period of major repression in the country: I have seen helicopter gun ships hovering over a university killing students. I have seen a university surrounded by tanks with students manning the gates in balaclavas, and read of the deaths in the days before and after. I have had a woman say to me: "Missus I too 'fraid to speak. No one speak here – not mother to son, not sister to brother." In cases like these, speaking, thinking or acting independently was *literally* more than your life was worth. When a university education consists of the discipline of regurgitation of the party line, and when a government agency's job is to protect the government and nothing else, it takes two generations for the people who become government servants to move on from the agencies where they rise to be senior managers and hence for institutional change to happen.

Those fighting the repression seldom become influential bureaucrats; they take the political or NGO route when there is change. Even ten or twenty years after a move to something resembling democracy, you will not find a transparently honest senior bureaucrat to work with as a counterpart. If your counterpart is recruited from the private sector, the game of withholding information will be played out until you all recognize the power and importance of the bureaucrat. This person will be losing power and realizing that they do not have a role in the new country. They will be holding on every inch of the way. These people are usually obeyed but despised by communities. They cannot be trusted at any point to participate in community participation exercises because they will not give up power. But neither can they be trusted to have a single innovative, challenging idea.

When the bureaucrat is also a 'civil society' leader: Many of us will have worked in countries where all NGOs have to be registered with the government; where all donors' funds are strictly monitored and approved by the government; where NGOs are a lucrative, foreign-exchange earning small business sector, rife with nepotism and corruption. In Bangladesh and the Philippines for example, I have heard conversations between women of the capitals' elites asking each other: "How are your NGOs? Six now? I've just had another idea for one too." In some countries the office-holders of NGOs also hold bureaucratic positions, but wages are so low (if they are paid regularly at all) that everyone who can find something has another job. And if you speak English, and if your relatives are office holders in the right places, to also be an NGO professional is a desirable option.

When the donor knows best 'what is good for them': I have also had the opportunity to observe genuine politically active grassroots organisations being invited to take on the philanthropic donor's agenda to receive funding. An application, which is about empowered capacity-building and has been arrived at through rigorous, lengthy, engaged community meetings becomes a vehicle for attempted hijack, with a conference, international speakers, and a publication in the donor counter-bid. Outcomes for which the community has no need, no resources, no energy, are proffered as conditions. I have never heard of the Global Fund for Women doing this. I have however been present to hear it in the offices of the Ford Foundation. I have also led an FAO project where the pressure from Rome and the recipient capital were for activities that bore no relationship to the project document.

When no one knows how to move from information to policy to implementation: Actually this is not a problem confined to national bureaucrats in recipient countries. It is particularly evident among the project leaders from Ivy League universities on some of the multilateral schemes with the biggest budgets.

The truth is they have not made or implemented a policy at a national level in their lives. In my experience, great Western agronomists, engineers or economists appointed as multi or bilateral project leaders do not regularly brief themselves on national constitutions and rights-based legislation, the last several years of Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch country reports, the nature and functioning of the domestic political system, or any international legal obligations entered into by the recipient country. They certainly do not ask for the latest Status of Women documents. Consultation with civil society is not part of their service contract nor are they tasked with it in their Terms of Reference. The best analysts available are the communities to be affected by the project, but as far as these foreigners are concerned, the analysis should be done by 'social science' experts; engaging with the local people is not something from which they could possibly learn.

When your national counterparts will accept some locations for civil society engagement through pilot projects but not others: If you are working on a national project in Indonesia, your counterparts will argue very hard for training or pilot programmes to be held in Bali. If in Nepal, they would prefer to be on the terai, within a day's trip of Kathmandu. This means that the same communities are the basis of all the student theses, the NGO projects and the Ministry's data collection. The available micro-data, therefore, is severely flawed because: a) the micro-economy grows from being everyone's pilot study; b) respondent fatigue, or the 'professional respondent'; and c) wily village leaders on the take. In the absence of anything else available, 'data' collected from these communities is then generalized to entire regions or the whole of the country as 'indicative'. On rare occasions you strike the bureaucratic exception in both the international contractor and the national counterpart, revealing the many issues involved with having so-called 'international experts' involved at all. But while this remains an exception, there is a place for consultants who can pressure projects into

consultation with the real people affected by programmes and projects and to pressure for projects to respond to the analyses of the local people. The international consultant as feminist action researcher can force a project to 'discover the poor'. Through a combination of human rights conventions ratified by the recipient country, boosted by the rhetoric of their constitution, and a pedantic reading of the donor's policies on development assistance, you can usually bring a project or a programme to a complete halt and force it to adhere to the language of those documents before it continues. It does not require specific skill, just a little strategic forethought as to when to play that card and then some stubborn resilience. This usually means that the poor have to be 'consulted.'

The World Bank Discovers the Poor

In the late 1990s, the World Bank sponsored consultations with more than sixty thousand poor men and women from over fifty countries and discovered *that poor people were the real experts on the multi-dimensional and complex issues of poverty!* The research was published in a three volume series.⁶ The researchers did ask the gender question, but not many of the narratives are rights-based or make explicit links with human rights covered by United Nations covenants.

Despite this massive study, there is little evidence that the voices of the poor have markedly influenced World Bank policy or practice. Senior World Bank officials do not have the skills to convert triangulated qualitative research into targeted policy programmes for outcomes negotiated with the *actual experts* on poverty, i.e. the poor. The growing emphasis on participatory evaluation should be a major concern, given that no genuine grassroots participation has occurred in the identification of the goals and the objectives, the parameters of the project, or the outcomes desired of the project by those directly impacted. Agencies expect communities to respond to an evaluation of someone else's agenda. It has not been at all clear that the World Bank's exercise has gone beyond the opening of spaces for those whose voices are rarely heard.

The Problem with Civil Society⁷

While many of the "voices of the poor" in the World Bank study used rights-based language, development initiatives have been phrased in the international community's language of cop-out: 'civil society' (and just what is 'uncivil' society?), governance, or strengthening institutions. Projects and programmes have titles such as 'Civil Society Empowerment for Poverty Reduction', 'The Case for Constructive Engagement', 'Human Resources Development and Utilization', 'Capacity Building', 'Modernization of the Legislative Assembly', and 'Institutional Strengthening Initiatives'. Occasionally a human right will be mentioned – for example you might find the words 'Literacy' or 'Poverty' in a project document, and 'Supporting Democratic Electoral Processes' gets dangerously close. But usually it is just more 'Citizen Security and Justice', or 'Transparency and Accountability in Government Practices', and now lots of 'Judicial Training'.

This has birthed a whole new industry of different NGOs, 'civil society' organizations, academics and experts, who are chasing the development dollar, and creating another monstrous layer between implementers and grassroots experts. There is something very unsettling about reading a sentence that claims: "the emergence and growth of civil society over the past two decades has been one of the most significant trends in international development",⁸ when social history reveals that political movements of communities of people organized in pursuit of their rights is nothing new. The fact that 'international development' power brokers now claim that "partnerships, among governments, private sector and civil society [are] the most effective way to achieve sustainable *economic* and *social* benefits for the poorest people"⁹ conveys two messages to me. The first is that 'civil and political' benefits are excluded. The second is that engaging with 'transnational civil society' should not be confused with, or considered a valid replacement, for consulting with the poor, the overwhelming majority of whom are women.

In the current circumstances, we are often invited to be grateful for the consultation that does occur. Most certainly, as Yasmine Shamsie describes, the

engagement between civil society and governments is “tentative and fraught with a mix of apprehension and grudging necessity. The growing sense of necessity stems from a belated appreciation for the fact that a strong and active citizenry is the indispensable foundation of democratic governance. The apprehension [is about]...representivity [*sic*] accountability and [the] legitimacy of civil society organisations.”¹⁰

There is obviously a distinction in terms of these characteristics between, say, Oxfam, some groups of academics organising themselves as a public policy institute, and a textile workers’ union. Yet each of these is organised, has some access, and has a form of prescribed legitimacy and accountability. Such organisations like to have ‘consultative mechanisms’ in place. But does that mean that the voices of the poor are heard, as moderated through these middle men and women? Isn’t that all a bit too cosy?

Where has the Rights Agenda Gone?

Personally, I cannot avoid a perspective that suspects that the focus on ‘civil society’ and ‘governance’ is *not* an exercise in the subtle use of euphemisms by donors to insert civil and political rights into their programmes. It is about *avoiding* a rights-based approach, and also an exercise in control of NGO or Civil Society groups. A programme by a donor will usually include at least two steps: a) ‘Developing NGOs and their Capacity’, and b) ‘Sustaining Partnerships’ with them. Money will flow from donors to groups which have agendas that suit. NGOs do like to sustain themselves and know where their next job is coming from. At times, this can lead NGO governing bodies to make policy decisions to refrain from any activities that could be considered advocacy. The mantra will be: At the nation state level, by all means train and participate, but do not take political action. At the international level, multilaterals will take care of those ‘transnational civil society groups’ who have a solid base of citizenry support and are not donor dependent by engaging them at the

top table in ‘civil society’ dialogues, as long as they ‘behave’. They will even staff whole units for this ‘engagement’, as the World Bank has done since 2002.

Now let me hastily add some caveats here. I do not want Greenpeace, Amnesty International or Save the Children to change their mandate or stop their work. I also realize that there are some very important exceptions to the organization of ‘civil society’ NGOs, where the active political participation of the poor is the rule as opposed to the exception. Here I would cite the case of India. I have also met stunningly courageous feminists on the leading edge of ‘civil society’ groups in Eastern Europe for example, who do not back down on an agenda in order to placate the donor. Furthermore, I am not absurdly romantic about the capacity of all the poor to participate and respond constructively all the time. Some will always have been too recently terrorised, too impoverished or have been without fundamental rights for so long that they do not have the capacity for constructive participation in that project at that time. The presence, then, of an NGO of integrity with the ability to represent these groups for a sustained period without ‘taking charge’ is a critical factor to help prevent further abuse.

We also ‘have to be there’, as the Civil Society Declaration at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva, December 10 – 12, 2003, demonstrated. In an effort to overcome the narrow understanding of information and communication technologies as only telecommunications and the Internet, and because the preparatory process for a summit was more than two years old, the WSIS Civil Society Plenary adopted the document *Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs*.¹¹ Two key issues on which governments seemed hopelessly divided were how to deal with imbalances in and among nations to overcome the ‘digital divide’, and agreeing on a commitment to international human rights (in particular ‘freedom of information’) as the foundation for the WSIS *Declaration of Principles and Plan of*

Action. The Civil Society group has produced a list of essential benchmarks against which they will further assess developments and outcomes in the WSIS process.

There are good examples of significant successes by international civil society. Take the case studies used by the Centre for Global Governance at the London School of Economics in their *Global Society Year Book 2002*. These were the cases of movements around corporate social responsibility, HIV/AIDS, and the International Criminal Court. The case study on the International Criminal Court details the 'institutional' and 'formal' history of getting to the Rome Conference (June – July 1998) to adopt the definitive treaty. It points out that half of the 236 NGOs represented legal, professional or human rights groups. Others either at the domestic level or within the Preparatory Conferences included women's organizations, peace and conflict resolution groups, church and religious groups, and UN organizations.

When I think about what mobilized my own support for the International Criminal Court, I remember the Mothers of the Disappeared, banging pots or dancing alone. I remember the comfort women of South East Asia in WW II. I remember the testimonies of the raped Bosnian women in the conflict in the former-

Yugoslavia. Now maybe a handful of those women made it to Rome, but their grassroots civil and political action and their testimonies, along with other evidence, made it possible for others to translate this *expertise born of experience* into the language of advocacy required on the floor of a UN conference. What is amazing is that with the exception of the human carpet demonstration led by Amnesty International during the Rome Conference, the lives and experiences of these women have disappeared from the civil society case study of the LSE's prestigious Centre.

Contrast this with the front line engagement of activists in the mobilisations for the rights of people living with AIDS (PWA).¹² Civil Society mobilisation in the late 1980s began in the United States in an environment of judgement and stigma, as the disease was so linked with the gay male community. The resort to direct action by groups such as Act Up saw those with AIDS finally invited to the conferences that discussed them. In the South, a major issue has been access to drugs to live with AIDS, when so many of those who have the disease are so poor. But the activism of PWA, and their friends and families, persuaded the governments of India, Brazil and Thailand to allow generic production of otherwise expensive drugs, against WTO regulations. At the same time, Northern Civil Society has sustained

Endnotes:

- ¹ Gibbs, Lois Marie, *Love Canal: The Story Continues*, New Society Pub, (1998).
- ² Report of comments by Thomas Carothers, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment Symposium, December 14, 2000, <<http://www.ceip.org/files/events>>.
- ³ Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos), New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.
- ⁴ *Action and Knowledge: breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*, Orland Fals-Borda & Muhammad Anisur Rahman (eds.), New York: Apex Press, 1991.
- ⁵ Chambers, Robert. *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997.
- ⁶ Narayan, Deepa, et al., *Can Anyone Hear Us? Crying Out for Change*, and *From Many Lands*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- ⁷ I am not going to bother here with the academic dispute about whether 'civil society' is about NGO's or civil society movements or organizations: for coverage of this see <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/yearbook.htm> Volume 2 page 5 2002. 28 Aug 2003.
- ⁸ Carnegie Endowment Symposium, *op.cit.*
- ⁹ World Bank Group, DevNews Media Centre, Civil Society: 28 Aug 2003, <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20040873~menuPK:34480~pagePK:36694~piPK:116742~theSitePK:4607,00.html>>.
- ¹⁰ North South Institute, *Mutual Misgivings: Civil Society Inclusion in the Americas*, Ottawa, Canada, October 2003.
- ¹¹ <http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/doc_single-en-1179.asp>.
- ¹² See Chapter 5: *Time to Stop and Think: HIV/AIDS, Global Civil Society, and People's Politics*. <[http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/PDF/PDF2002/GCS2002%20pages%20\[05\]%20.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Yearbook/PDF/PDF2002/GCS2002%20pages%20[05]%20.pdf)>.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ See for example Arditti, R. *Science and Liberation*, Boston: South End, 1980, and *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*; Fonow Mary Margaret (ed.), Indiana University Press, 1991.

pressure on their governments and multinationals to support the PWA voices from the South. However Hakan Seckinelgin concludes: “After a long advocacy and service-based involvement of civil society in the developing world, the picture is not too optimistic. Therefore it has become imperative for people to voice – indeed shout – their needs, formulated as rights.”¹³

Seckinelgin’s comment reminds me of further questions that arise from unease. What is the difference between NGOs that stay with the language of rights and social justice, and others that are happy to compliantly abandon it for ‘recognition’? How is it that so many who capture the donor dollar have abandoned the rights language and now appear as Civil Society ‘partners’?

Standing in their Sunshine

And there’s a further issue that demands attention: the question of the timing. When should an NGO, which has used its institutional operating skills to command some inner circle space, step aside and leave that area to be occupied by the expert voices of those from the grassroots? This reminds me again of a path we have travelled as academic researchers in this wave of the feminist movement. In the 1970s, as feminist work was trashed as being subjective, lacking clinical detachment, being qualitative or too participatory, our methods threw the practice and process of much mainstream research into relief. There was a pattern in terms of the distance of the white coated professor from the actual collection of data. The professor might design the research, but would keep himself several steps removed from any of the repetitive, boring

recording, note taking or observational steps. These might instead be done by a series of assistants. Then he would lead the analysis of the data, having been engaged in none of that frontline activity.¹⁴ And the analysis would be regarded as rigorous and reputable, although it comprehensively was neither.

Now in the embrace of the projects and programmes for ‘civil society engagement’, ‘community participation’, and ‘governance’, too many academics, multilaterals, donors and NGOs, are operating on the basis that *the* significant partnerships, engagements and communications can occur one or more steps removed from the primary experts. At that level, the politics is lost. The expert and primary statement is translated into something less challenging to the new, comfortable order. The ‘voices of the poor’ are often being betrayed by those who purport to represent them!

There is a great line in a song by the Australian feminist Judy Small which is “you don’t speak for me.” I suspect that for much of the cacophony of sound from civil society’s inner circle, this line is an adequate repost. I know there are no simple solutions to these issues. The ‘simple’ approach has been the homogenising of ‘civil society’. The beat up about ‘civil society’ and its processes, as if it is a relatively recent phenomena discovered in Eastern Europe in the last twenty years, is laughable to any feminist with a remote sense of the planet’s social history. But there are pitfalls on this route, and cooption attractions aplenty. Sure we have to ‘be there’ – and in as many guises (and disguises) as possible. But let’s not for one moment relax our vigilance, or our sense of risk and our sense of humour. We’ll need them all for this round.



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