

Challenges for participatory governance in India

Disjuncture in practice

Participatory Governance in India: A brief context

- Top-down governance the norm in postcolonial India
- Ineffective initiatives for community participation since the 1960s
- Decentralisation not a state priority until recently

Changes in the 1990s

- Pockets of domestic dissatisfaction and resistance (environmental social movements)
- Donor-led thrust on decentralised & participatory governance
- Two state responses:
 - Elected local bodies given constitutional recognition
 - Several development programmes accorded a participatory focus

Watershed Development: A new participatory policy, 1994

- A soil and water conservation based rural livelihoods programme
- History of top-down implementation
- National policy crafted by a small coterie of Union Ministry officials
- But the adoption of a decentralised structure brought many new actors into implementation process

Disjuncture between different levels of practice

- Disjuncture between policy and practice is well-known
- Disjuncture between implementers at different levels subverted goals of participatory governance
- Case study of a district level project office in Andhra Pradesh, a state in southern India
- Project office led by senior civil servant; actual projects implemented by junior officers on temporary contracts

What did participatory governance mean at different levels?

For Project Director:

- To accomplish physical and financial targets while adhering to procedures for participatory project management, received from above
- How to reorient his team of officers that is unused to participatory methods of working
- Responded by itemising participation into accountable segments together with project targets AND equated local participation to the 'recordable' demonstration of consent

What did participatory governance mean at different levels?

For local project officials:

- How to ensure that the project's participatory protocol is observed on paper
- Disregard local elites' subversion of participatory procedures
- Maintain 'upward-facing' system of representations of project procedures
- Not bothered by local incredulity of project-based participatory governance

Conclusion

- Participatory governance worked as a rhetorical state strategy
- Policy makers who state their conviction explicitly do not confront popular cynicism
- Direct implementers unconcerned about credibility of participatory discourse
- Need for greater thinking on the incentives available to critical implementers to substantiate participatory governance