



## Mobilising for Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation

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**Vera Schattan P. Coelho and Bettina von Lieres (eds.)**

*Mobilising for Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation*

Zed Books, London, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-84813-446-1, 288 pp.

This book is a worthwhile attempt to measure the impact of belonging to civil and non-governmental organisations on people's ability to mobilise, participate and get the tools and understanding to be able to fight for their rights. The experiences of social mobilisation studied in Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa provide a wider view of the phenomenal impact that the combination of development projects and civil rights can have in the daily life of beneficiaries in the long term, as their awareness grows about human rights and the government obligations to provide them with services.

The book is divided in four parts. The first explores the impact of the work of some NGOs and associations with the poor population in Kenya, Bangladesh, and Angola. The case studies look for the relationship between development, human rights, and outcomes of citizen mobilisation mediated by organised civil society groups to improve welfare outcome and policy changes, as result of increasing people's knowledge of their rights and developing an active citizenship at the grassroots level. The results presented show limited effectiveness; however, it can be seen as the beginning of opening new institutional channels of interaction between the citizens and the state.

In the second part, each chapter describes citizen mobilisation led by social movements, which often rely on larger associations. The cases of Brazil and South Africa show how citizen engagement in the public sphere can shape democratic possibilities and policy changes to access health services. The indigenous peoples in the Amazon are now taking part in the management of these services along with the government; and poor urban women in Cape Town are able to access housing. The Nigeria case shows that electoral systems and rules can be changed as result of social mobilisation such as the 'anti-third term'. These cases also demonstrate the irony that these mobilisations can both facilitate access to rights and services, but also reinforce inequality distribution among marginalised groups.

In the third part of the book the focus is on the engagement in formal governance mechanism by citizens of India, Brazil, and Kenya, and the challenges that exist to entry into the institutional decision-making space. In Kenya, the book shows how a number of civil society leaders, who were part of a social mobilisation movement, ran for office and became part of the government, intending to push forward the democratisation agenda. The reality is that once in power many of these leaders did not behave any differently from the previous officials.

In India the people from the lowest cast (*dalit*) showed how social mobilisation with affirmative action and social inclusion provided a large gain not just in terms of access to services and infrastructure, but moreover with the internalisation of the concept of social justice by this historically excluded group.

The last section looks in more detail at the styles of activism and strategies for mobilisation: from the experiences of the street committees in Cape Town – where they include diverse forms of protest and formal channels of representation – to direct contact with politicians and participation in wider associations to fulfil their demands. Another experience shared is that of the Brazilians from Ribeira Valley, who use different tools to bring together various organisations in mobilisation around common issues such as access to land, natural resources, and public policies. The cases make clear that past political experiences, leadership, and cultural habits shaped the choices and strategies for collective action.

While the experiences in the book are particular, responding to very local problems, the analysis draws out some lessons from each of them, which can be applied in differing contexts elsewhere.

*Mobilising for Democracy* aims to demonstrate that social associations can make a difference in building democratic citizenship by increasing people's knowledge about their rights. It also highlights the fact while some individuals incorporate this knowledge in their daily lives and develop a leadership role in the community, such participation does not necessarily lead to democratisation, in the broader sense. The democratic outcome is uneven as they are part of non-linear process, and this knowledge can also become an instrument for some of the leaders to get into office or use the organisation as political bounty.

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