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Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance in Eastern India: participation, politics and action research

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Abstract: This paper uses an action research project on governance reform in Eastern India to reflect on the politics of participatory development. In a situation where there are profound difficulties in local governance, it assesses the potential for participatory forms of stakeholder engagement to begin a process of reform. It criticises views of reform put forward by both the World Bank and Robert Chambers, and argues instead that critical self-reflection and the construction of alliances among a variety of reform-minded actors are important first steps in building political capabilities to challenge structural blockages to pro-poor governance.

Keywords: participation, governance reform, action research, political capabilities, Robert Chambers, Bihar (India)

1 Enhancing Pro-Poor Governance: Reforming People and Institutions

In this paper, we use the experience of a recently completed project in West Bengal and Bihar, India, to reflect on the role that ‘action research’ can play in promoting governance reform. Our project consisted of a series of workshops through which a range of ‘stakeholders’ (NGOs and social activists, civil servants, politicians and the lay public) identified and debated the institutional constraints to pro-poor governance in ‘problem’ districts of both States. The workshops were also intended to build wider political support for change, culminating in a collaboratively produced agenda for reform. Here, we link our experience of these workshops to the central themes of this special edition of *Progress in Development Studies* by investigating the complexities of using participatory methods within a reform process. In doing so, we reflect on our own experiences as academics moving into the realm of development practice, but also raise two wider questions. First, we consider the importance of politics within participatory practice: are existing understandings of participatory development politically naïve, or even – as some commentators have suggested – reactionary? Second, we engage critically with the World Bank’s interpretation of pro-poor governance as highlighted within the *World Development Report 2000/1: Attacking Poverty* (World Bank, 2000).¹

In the eyes of its most celebrated proponent, Robert Chambers, participatory development requires a paradigm shift in the outlook and behaviour of development professionals and, significantly for him, this shift is primarily individual and personal rather than institutional and political (Chambers, 1997, Chapter 7). Despite its rapid proliferation and uptake within the World Bank, this view of participatory development is not without its critics. In *Participation, the New Tyranny?* Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) note two important sets of reservations about participatory development: concerns over the technical/methodological problems of participation (focusing on PRA methods), and questions regarding the constraining effects of participatory discourse and practice. In terms of the former, participatory techniques are criticised for their partiality: they produce homogenous ‘local’ viewpoints where none previously existed, and they privilege certain voices within the process of participation whilst excluding others (see *inter alia* Francis, 2000; Cleaver 2000, and Guijt and Shah 1998). These questions were pertinent to our own practice in conducting the project workshops, and we reflect on them below. Elsewhere in the same volume, Uma Kothari, and Heiko Henkel and Reoderick Stirrat make more fundamental criticisms of

¹ Hereafter referred to as WDR 2000/1

participatory practice. They argue that participation incorporates and represents ‘clients’ of development in particular and problematic ways: it gives them a ‘voice’, but only within highly-orchestrated processes where real choice between – and power over – developmental outcomes are strictly limited. For these authors, participatory methods are Foucauldian disciplinary practices *par excellence*, not only closing down the space for genuine debate, but placing responsibility for the success (or otherwise) of development projects squarely on the shoulders of the beneficiaries (Kothari, 2001).

Rather than expanding these criticisms, we wish here to question whether this ‘depoliticisation’ of development is an inevitable part of participatory practice. Two important aspects of our own project suggest that this may not necessarily be so. First, it is possible that a degree of reflexivity – consideration of our own positionality and of the dynamics of the workshops more broadly – can retain the institutional and political aspects of reform as ‘live’ issues that are not reduced to questions of individual change. Second, the empirical focus of our work is significant: by using participatory techniques to promote *governance reform*, questions of politics and power can explicitly be highlighted for all stakeholders.

Turning to the process of reform, WDR 2000/1 offers a useful point of entry to debates on enhancing pro-poor governance. The report identifies empowerment as a core component in attacking poverty, alongside security and the World Bank’s more familiar promotion of market-based ‘opportunity’. Despite the ambivalent reception of the report (see *inter alia* Hubbard 2001; Chambers 2001; Wade 2001), the inclusion of empowerment as a key theme represents something of a change in the Bank’s discourse. In particular, the chapter on *Making State Institutions More Responsive to Poor People* explicitly acknowledges that this is a complex and contested process. Improving the accountability of public administration is highlighted, decentralisation is seen as a desirable but problematic goal (given the ever-present risk of capture by local elites), and pro-poor coalitions are recognised as important sources of political pressure for furthering reforms. To this extent, WDR 2000/2001 has responded to key ideas from the last decade or so of alternative development debates, not least in recognising that development is an explicitly political process.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

A more careful reading of WDR 2000/1 would, however, suggest two important limitations to the Bank’s view of political reform. First, people’s participation appears only as a sub-theme of decentralisation (p.108) within this chapter, and is displaced instead to an earlier discussion of enhancing service delivery and local management of common property resources. By presenting participation in this manner, WDR 2000/1 essentially reinforces the link between

people's participation and the *localisation* of development issues, a linkage that Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke (2000) have shown to be highly problematic. More generally, the model that emerges is a combination of top-down managerial reform from central government (creating the right incentive structures for civil servants, and an enabling environment for poor people's associations) and faith in (empowered) communities as mechanisms for monitoring local state agencies (Figure 1). Whilst this model may have desirable elements, it leaves a lingering sense that 'powerful elites' (p.107) and their 'political interference' (p.111) constitute and reside in a murky middle-ground between a fair-dealing central state and its upright citizens. As such, this reproduces not only an idealised view of communities but also that negative sense of political society which Mick Moore and James Putzel's background paper to WDR 2000/1 explicitly aimed to challenge.² In taking up these issues below we try to think more imaginatively about the relationship between space and politics in a context where political society was undoubtedly contributing to governance problems.

2 Blockages to Pro-Poor Governance in Eastern India

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

Between 1998 and 2000, we undertook a detailed programme of academic research that examined poor people's interactions with government in five Districts of West Bengal and Bihar/Jharkhand (Figure 2). At the end of this period we selected two of these Districts, Bhojpur (central Bihar) and Malda (West Bengal), for follow-up action to address the severe blockages to pro-poor governance we had identified in our academic study (Srivastava *et al.* 2001a; Véron *et al.* 2001; Corbridge *et al.*, 2002).³ Bihar as a whole is often characterised as a

² Their paper opens with the lines:

There is a tradition in aid and development agencies of bringing in political analysis, if at all, in terms of problems and difficulties. 'Politics' is why desirable things may not happen. Politics is messy. Political analysis is used only to explain and to try to fix things that have already gone wrong.

Although WDR 2000/1 recognises the possibilities for building pro-poor alliances stressed elsewhere in the background paper, it has neither distanced itself from this tradition, nor taken up the call for detailed, open-minded analysis of local political practices that forms one of Moore and Putzel's main policy prescriptions.

³ The original academic project, *Rural Poverty, the Developmental State and Spaces of Empowerment in Bihar and West Bengal*, looked at poor people's interaction with local government across a range of state functions: infrastructural development, human capacity building, enforcing pro-poor legislation (particularly land and labour law), and the maintenance of law and order. The research was funded by

‘failed’ state within the Indian federation, and Bhojpur is renowned for severe caste-related violence (Kohli, 1990, p.224-32). Here, we focus on our work in Bhojpur, both to take a ‘hard’ case to experiment with action research techniques and to raise questions about these negative stereotypes.⁴ Within the follow-up project, problems of governance were raised with participants by discussing the practical operation of existing government development initiatives. In response to sensitising questions on government reform, people’s empowerment and social and political change, participants were encouraged to develop their own solutions to these problems. Below we give illustrative examples from each of these broad areas of the current blockages to pro-poor governance, before turning to the ways in which our action research sought to address these.

Government reform: ‘unreconstructed’ development personnel

In our academic research we catalogued numerous instances where Chambers’ ‘uppers’ – or, to be more specific, the relatively low-ranking civil servants that form the interface between government and the rural poor – were failing to be responsive to the lay public. In Bihar, where local councillors had not been elected between 1978 and 2001, civil servants were central to the relationship between ‘government’ in a generic sense and the poor. Depressingly, but unsurprisingly, the poor were usually second-class citizens in these relationships, marginalised by the prejudices of the officials employed to protect and support them.⁵

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⁴ Although we highlight problems in Bihar’s governance below, our project was undertaken when elected local governments (*panchayats*) had just been re-established across the State, making this an opportune moment at which to lobby for ongoing reform. It is also important to note these problems were not specific to Bihar: despite the widely reported successes of West Bengal in promoting good governance (for a recent example, see Mitra, 2001), reform was also desperately needed in Malda District.

⁵ Negative gender and ethnic stereotypes abound, and the treatment of *adivasi* (indigenous/‘tribal’) people was particularly poor in this regard. In Jharkhand, government staff commonly characterised *adivasis* as lazy or uninterested/unable to participate in development projects due to their alleged ‘backwardness’.

In the work of Robert Chambers, changing such behaviour among developmental personnel is a key matter for concern. Instilling a more participatory culture could indeed do much to help the rural poor become active partners within development programmes, although current attitudes reflect deep-seated and widespread prejudices. However, officials' lack of responsiveness was not simply a matter of *personal* attitudes, but reflected a number of wider institutional constraints. Within the State civil service in Bihar, as elsewhere in India, training that would promote a different work culture is absent. Specifically, lower-ranking civil servants involved in the action research repeatedly highlighted their need for skills in working with the public: their training has not kept pace with the participatory elements of many national development programmes which now require officials to engage stakeholders within public meetings (c.f. Williams et al., 2002). But poor training was only one of many problems within the prevailing culture of management. Career progression was automatic for higher-ranking staff, but non-existent for many of those at the 'front line' of contact with the public; incentives for good work were lacking; and the monitoring of an individual's work relied on 'top-down' (distanced and rule-based) surveillance rather than on public accountability.⁶

Beyond such institutional blockages, the position of bureaucrats was further hampered by the political culture in which they were located. Well-entrenched systems of illicit cuts and commissions were in place throughout the research Districts, and these were closely linked with 'political interference' in the running of development projects and programmes. In Bihar, medium-ranking government staff, and even some District Magistrates, freely admitted that they had effectively relinquished their executive power over the selection of development projects to Members of the State Legislative Assembly and their local patrons. The geography of state spending that results was thus primarily driven by electoral rather than developmental concerns (for details, see Srivastava *et al.*, 2001a).

⁶ Merilee Grindle's description of weak public organisations is thus appropriate here:

The state of the art in public sector training continues to revolve primarily around knowledge of systems, structures, procedures, rules and legal precedents and pays much less attention to the importance of performance-oriented management styles that encourage participation, flexibility, teamwork, problem solving and equity.

(Grindle, 1997, 487)

People's Empowerment: the need for partnership and knowledge-sharing

Despite these systematic problems of the local state, people's empowerment and participation are present as explicit objectives among a range of governmental development activities in India today. Two examples studied by us were the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), the latest in a long line of rural works programmes, and primary education provision through the Bihar Education Project (BEP). An important feature of the EAS was that key project decisions should be made in village open meetings; this would ensure grassroots input to the selection of employment schemes and public accountability in their execution. Alongside other measures to improve the quality of education, the BEP included provisions for lay villagers to monitor school performance through village education committees. These innovations, if carried through into practice, had the potential to alter dramatically the relationships between the rural poor and local state officials, recognising the former as stakeholders rather than supplicants in development processes.

As it turned out, most EAS open meetings existed on paper only (save for in Midnapore District, West Bengal), and the village education committees were unclear of their membership, roles and responsibilities. Many of these failures resulted from information bottlenecks: innovations were stymied because the intended beneficiaries were never made aware of their rights. For example, one of the key provisions of EAS – that unemployed labourers could demand work – was known by less than 10% of respondents in the Bihar Districts of our study.

Such failures again relate to systematic problems in local government. Innovative schemes are subject to various stages of reinterpretation as they make the long descent from New Delhi to the Block Development Office, with various groups having interests in suppressing information about participatory elements of projects *en route*.⁷ In addition, finding appropriate media and mechanisms for informing the public about development initiatives has been a low priority. Even in West Bengal, where 25 years of decentralised government could have changed these patterns dramatically, councillors and state employees often resorted to

⁷ In some cases, suppression of information is clearly self-interested, allowing powerful individuals to direct funding as they see fit. In others, the re-writing of development goals was well intentioned. In Bihar, subtle shifts in scheme interpretation directed EAS resources towards the provision of (literally) concrete assets in preference to maximising work-days. One reason for this shift was to restrict the pilfering of resources from earthwork-based schemes where 'top-down' monitoring of spending was more difficult (Srivastava et al. 2001a). This example highlights the importance of Moore and Putzel's call for local political analysis to understand the actual operation of schemes and programmes.

technical language, rules and procedures rather than communicating the spirit or intent of programmes to the public.

Beyond these failings of local government, alternative mechanisms for information flow were lacking. Our academic research had indicated that although NGOs and social activists were present in the research Districts, they had little or no understanding of government projects and their participatory intent. Furthermore, many did not consider activism to improve accountability within such projects as part of their role. These failures to communicate development innovations not only show the importance of information within poor people's empowerment, but also indicate the need for new structures of exchange between government and other social actors to promote good governance.

Social and Political Change: dysfunctional politics and dispersed pressure for reform

A third area of difficulty concerns the social and political contexts in which government operates. Political parties in Bhojpur have helped to maintain a system of caste-based competition and patronage, in preference to what could be termed a 'politics of development'. Few villagers expected to hold politicians to account between elections, or even to make a judgement of who to support on the basis of their performance in office. Elections were isolated events of collective (and often combative) political mobilisation which occurred outside the normal processes of governance, and which limited 'democracy' to making this choice of representative. This means that creating pro-poor governance was not simply a question of managerial reform for the civil service: reform of political parties and their practices was also desperately needed.

These political difficulties fed in to and were further exacerbated by dispersed social pressures for reform. Competition rather than collaboration between potential beneficiaries was commonplace, even within the same caste and village, and most villagers' dealings with the state are mediated by unofficial 'fixers'. These middlemen used their knowledge of and contacts with the local state to arrange services for their clients, usually at a price,⁸ but in doing so contributed to blockages in information flow that restricted wider public engagements with government that could in turn facilitate empowerment. Local and external perceptions of Bihar as a 'failed state' undoubtedly made the imagining of a more positive scenario still more difficult for many of those who might be expected to benefit from pro-poor

⁸ The prices can be high, and the delivery of services uncertain: in one case in Vaishali District (North Bihar), a middleman had arranged government loans for his caste fellows, but then kept the money and left his 'clients' to repay the debt. The fact that this 'fixer' could remain in the village without fear or shame was indicative of wider problems of *intra*-community trust and co-operation.

governance. Many NGOs and activists believed that the state was *uniformly* venal and corrupt, and as a result they, along with many poorer villagers, were more likely to search for alternatives to state-led development than to engage in struggles for reform.⁹

Taken together, these three areas highlight serious difficulties in the relationship between the rural poor and the local government institutions entrusted with their uplift and protection. The problems were not located with single actors – behaviour specific to ‘corrupt individuals’ or ‘anti-social’ groups – but rather were structural problems linking private citizens, the bureaucracy and politicians in relationships that were dysfunctional in societal terms.¹⁰ As such, the search for ameliorative action is complex, and calls into question both Chambers’ vision of reorienting development professionals as individuals, and the assumptions implicit within World Bank’s political analysis of governance. Whilst a murky middle-ground of self-interested local elites certainly contributed to Bihar’s problems, enlightened State-level leadership and concerted grassroots pressure do not currently provide the ‘pincer movement’ for reform that the Bank envisages.

Enhancing pro-poor governance thus requires a process of action that is political in a wider – and more imaginative – sense. Poor people’s empowerment, in Bhojpur as elsewhere, will require the construction of alliances among different actors able consciously to challenge these existing problems and promote politically realistic alternatives. In the following section we assess the potential for action research to drive such a process forwards.

3 Enhancing pro-poor governance through action research

The Action Research Project: aims and structure

Given the range of problems outlined above, we had to think carefully about the aim and roles of our own intervention in the process of governance reform. Moore and Putzel (1999, p.22) argue that expanding the political capabilities of the poor should be a key criterion in the evaluation of development programmes, and we had a rare opportunity to incorporate this aim within our action research. Although we had set ourselves concrete goals in terms of stakeholder engagement and the production of a set of recommendations for reform, we could

⁹ If, as Moore and Putzel (1999) argue, social movements are primarily reactive, this ‘exit strategy’ is not surprising: pressure for reform is easier to generate where the state is actually operational.

¹⁰ This is not, of course, to deny that these relationships were highly ‘functional’ for those – particularly politicians and civil servants – able to extract rents from their positions of power within them. We return to the problems of dealing with these entrenched interest groups below.

also design the project process to maximise participants' opportunities to develop these capabilities. But what would meaningful enhancement of political capabilities mean, given the magnitude of governance problems in Bhojpur, and our own limitations as academics working within the confines of a short-term project? We took the position that our knowledge of the local operation of development projects was the key resource that we could share with participants: if we could use this to promote self-reflection, and genuine debate and learning between stakeholders, this might act as a catalyst to reform.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE]

As a result, the project was centred around a set of linked workshops, beginning with lay participants at the village-level, and concluding with State-level meetings attended by a range of senior figures from government, politics, academia, major NGOs and others (Figure 3). In between these events a series of Block- and District-level stakeholder meetings were held with NGOs, politicians, civil servants and social activists. In each workshop we presented the findings of our academic research, and encouraged participants to define and debate governance problems (including those we had introduced: see table 1 for details) and to develop possible solutions to them. The responses of participants in the early meetings were then presented in subsequent workshops, thus providing an opportunity for lower-level stakeholders' experiences and suggestions to be voiced before senior figures. Innovative methods (which we detail below) were required here, for to be effective participants not only had to engage fully in in-depth analysis and discussion, but also to reflect on their own roles – through action or inaction – in perpetuating the problems we described. Throughout, a delicate balance had to be struck between highlighting the severity of existing problems in pro-poor governance, while simultaneously motivating participants to consider their own potential to act in a reform process.

Taken together, the project activities represented a major consultative exercise and a determined attempt to use academic research to inform the production of a reform agenda. As we have noted, the project's intangible outcomes were of equal importance to the concrete outcomes listed in Figure 3. Given the key role of these intangible outcomes, it is therefore essential in evaluating our work to turn a critical eye to the participatory processes operating within the action research events. Whose voices were heard within the workshops and meetings, and to what effect?

Reflections on the process: making voices heard

Recent critiques of participation have considered in detail the shortcomings of participatory exercises,¹¹ and we use this literature here to reflect on the ability of the action research process to include its diverse participants, on its role in representing (or manipulating) group interests, and also on our own role as facilitators.

One key criticism of participatory projects is that they can all too easily assume a homogeneous ‘community’ within which events take place, while ignoring the exclusion, or under-representation, of certain groups (see Guijt and Shah 1998 for a discussion of these questions with respect to gender). The range of spatial scales at which our project was operating, and the range of stakeholders’ backgrounds, meant that we had to recognise the heterogeneity of our participants from the outset, and find ways in which these mixed communities could be engaged and represented. Our response was to foster inclusiveness through parallel mechanisms that respected these differences, whilst attempting to address the dual aims of encouraging action and self-reflection noted above.

To engage lay participants at the village level, we used a two-stage process of consultation. First of all, project workers¹² discussed the project aims on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis and circulated questions that prompted groups of villagers to reflect on problems of governance and possible solutions. Groups were self-selecting, and formulated their responses over a 14-day period. This was followed by a mass village-level meeting in which villagers’ responses were collected, and participants were informed about the new *panchayats* (elected local councils) through short speeches by key officials¹³ and a rural drama that depicted the possibilities and problems of *panchayat* work.¹⁴ In this meeting,

¹¹ See *inter alia*, the collections by Nelson and Wright (1995), Guijt and Shah (1998) and Cooke and Kothari (2001). Reflections on the use of participatory development within policy are more rare, but see Holland and Blackburn (1998), Blackburn and Holland (1999), and Johnson and Wilson (2000) on governance reform.

¹² In the action research, we were supported by Sushil Kumar (District Coordinator, District Literacy Campaign, Bhojpur) and his team of literacy activists: their involvement enabled us to canvass a range of villagers’ opinions across Sahar Block, Bhojpur.

¹³ The Secretary, Department of Panchayats, Sri Jayan Das Gupta (IAS) was one of the officials present: we are grateful to him for his support throughout our research in Bihar.

¹⁴ The rural drama, *Dugdugi*, was written specially for the project in the local dialect (Bhojpuri), depicting conflict over local development resources, and the *panchayat*’s need to resolve these through

which over 700 villagers attended, we deemed that the direct dissemination of messages about changing *panchayat* structures was the most effective way of building the political capacity of participants. The symbolic status of the meeting hopefully also contributed to this process: not only had senior civil servants come to their locality to address them, but participants could petition them directly with their own views, and publicly contribute to the drawing-up of a reform agenda.¹⁵

In the stakeholder meetings, the strategy we followed was to begin by describing the actual operation of development projects (the EAS and BEP), and then to use the problems we identified to raise wider questions about governance in Bihar. Our findings were presented as a subject for debate: we asked stakeholders whether they accorded with their own experiences, and whether our reading of the situation was correct. This form of presentation worked well, and produced a surprising degree of *public* confirmation of the problems in governance that supported the conduct of the rest of the workshop.¹⁶ We then facilitated detailed discussion sessions within focused and relatively homogenous sub-groups,¹⁷ to generate ideas for reform within particular areas (Table 1). Finally, the sub-groups' responses were discussed in a plenary session. Work in sub-groups allowed those in subordinate positions (such as lower-level civil servants) the space to develop their ideas among colleagues, before voicing what were often critical comments to their superiors from the relative anonymity of their group. Although perfect representation of participants is

peaceful means. The play was humorous and gently criticised authority figures: as a means of communication, it appeared to work particularly well.

¹⁵ Detailed discussion of written responses was not possible in the meeting itself for the 33 groups submitting these, although several respondents addressed the meeting with their views. All received feedback on their contributions after the event.

¹⁶ The use of qualitative analysis within our academic research was treated with suspicion by some respondents, but the picture we presented was widely deemed to be accurate. This agreement helped to stress the importance of developing alternatives to both participants and facilitators, and by raising these issues through a discussion of particular development projects we achieved two important tasks. First, when discussing reform at a general level, it allowed participants to 'ground' their comments in concrete examples. Second, it raised criticisms of *processes* of governance without pointing the finger at particular *individuals*: this helped set the tone for the 'breakout' groups that followed, looking for collective solutions and action, rather than seeking to attribute blame.

¹⁷ The composition of the sub-groups was set by us to ensure that participants with similar backgrounds or experience worked together.

impossible,¹⁸ this format allowed groups to build from their own and different experiences of governance issues, and avoided naïve assumptions of equality of ability to participate.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Still more complex than the issue of the workshops' inclusiveness is the question of what participation actually empowers people to say. As we have noted, the structure of the village session was such that there was less scope for open debate than in other workshops. Above and beyond such limitations, David Mosse (1994; 2001) demonstrates that the 'people's knowledge' that emerges from 'open' participatory exercises is highly mediated, reflecting not only intra-community power differences, but also subtle attempts by both community representatives and project directors to second-guess each others' needs and intentions. Mosse argues that participatory exercises should therefore be recognised as particular moments within ongoing struggles to re-present and re-organise the interests of clients and facilitators alike, rather than revealing a more fundamental 'truth' of participants' views.

Whilst we recognise the usefulness of Mosse's observations, it is important to note that our project differed significantly in two respects from many others that have used participation as a mechanism for improving service delivery. The first difference was that the direct, concrete output of the workshops was an agenda for reform: as such, any benefits of participation would not be alienable goods or resources, but a reshaping of the 'common property' of governance patterns. The second difference was that, as workshop facilitators, we only played a 'super-ordinate' role vis-à-vis the participants within the limited life-span of the project itself: we were not representatives of funding bodies who needed to be impressed, nor did we have other forms of direct authority over them. These elements of our project were made explicit to all participants, as were the nature of the 'outsider' audiences to which the report would be presented after its completion. We therefore hope that some of the more extreme forms of 'donor bias' did not apply to participation within our project.

By making these issues explicit in the workshops we did not, of course, remove differences in power or interests *between participants*, all of whom had their own stakes in changing or maintaining patterns of governance. Thus it is not surprising that while NGOs suggested playing a greater role watchdogs over development spending, senior civil servants were more resistant to this idea. State-level politicians, as will be noted below, were perhaps the most

¹⁸ In particular in the social activist's workshop, our strategy was criticised by Mohila Samaj (women's committee) representatives. Conscious of trying to retain a strong female voice within the plenary session, we had initially placed these participants in a single sub-group: they contested what they saw as a decision to 'ghettoise' them, and instead chose to place representatives in all groups.

resistant to change. Rather than disguising such tensions between different interests by attempting to present a single ‘consensus’ view, it was our intention to highlight these as subjects for debate within the plenary sessions and cross-stakeholder meetings. Our use of participation thus explicitly intended to shift developmental struggles away from participants’ immediate and individual interests, and towards the wider questions of institutional power highlighted by Mosse.

A third and related question revolves around the ‘neutrality’ of organisers/facilitators. Heiko Henkel and Reoderick Stirrat (2001, p.183) note that ‘facilitation’ is often described as an objective act, while in practice facilitators’ frame the participation process, promoting particular agendas for discussion and action whilst suppressing others. They therefore argue that development practitioners should critically reflect on their personal power and position instead of using a neutral language of participation and ‘grassroots control’ to disown their own interests. Our response to this issue within the project was twofold: to be explicit about the focus of the action research, but also to position ourselves as both facilitators *and* analysts.

In terms of the focus of the project, we informed all stakeholders at the outset that our agenda was to encourage participation in a process of reform in which we saw the state – for all its current flaws – as an important actor in widening political capabilities. As outlined above, the workshops *were* highly-orchestrated events, in which we framed discussion with findings from our research, and presented pre-set and focused tasks for participants. We would argue, however, that in talking about governance reform, the issues involved are so complex, inter-related and potentially abstract that ‘free’ participation was not a practical solution.

Furthermore, our experience was that structuring the framework for debates did not pre-determine their final outcomes.¹⁹ There were, inevitably, costs associated with this framing of the participatory process, in that it limited debate on other issues of importance to stakeholders. For example, some NGO representatives initially wanted to discuss avenues to poor people’s empowerment that would be entirely divorced from the state. We asked these participants to consider the costs and benefits of their position, and in particular to discuss their ability to put independent pressure on the state to achieve goals that were in accordance with their own. At the end of the workshops, many of these NGOs noted they would be interested in undertaking greater tactical engagement with the state: through face-to-face discussion with civil servants they had identified possibilities for action they had previously

¹⁹ For example, one issue we asked groups debating social and political change to discuss was changing the problematic role of the *dalals* or political brokers discussed above. Solutions varied from outlawing them, to community-based monitoring of their actions, and their formal training and incorporation within government outreach programmes.

been unaware of. The wider point that emerges from this example is that within participatory development activities, ‘outsiders imposing their agenda’ is not necessarily negative, as long as the process is explicit and challenges to that agenda are dealt with openly and constructively.

In terms of our positions within the project, a combination of facilitator and analyst roles was essential. We did not merely want to assist the production of a policy wish-list: we also wanted to analyse the process itself and comment on participants’ potential to contribute to reform. Within the workshops, we saw our role as ‘mere’ facilitators: encouraging focused yet open-ended debate engaging a broad spectrum of participants. Before and after each workshop, however, meetings of the project team involved careful analysis of each session’s outcomes, in which our own different interpretations of events were subject to intense discussion. It is from this process of self-reflection that the authorial ‘voice’ within the final project report (Srivastava *et al.* 2001b) emerges: rather than being ‘invisible’ editors of participants’ contributions, we saw our professional responsibility as researchers to ‘add value’ to these through our informed commentary and evaluation.

Reflections on the outcomes: alliances for change?

In terms of the tangible outcomes of the Bhojpur research, we can be confident that the project achieved its original aims. The total numbers of participants were large,²⁰ and included village-level through to State-level representatives of each stakeholder group. The final project report listed over 100 individual recommendations for change, on improvements in government capacity and accountability (35%), improvements in information flow (25%), measures for improving people’s participation in government (19%), and various measures aimed at tackling more generic social and political problems. As noted above, however, we considered that the collaborative production of a policy ‘wish-list’ was insufficient in itself as a project outcome. Here then, we focus on three questions: did the contents of these recommendations show evidence of rethinking governance issues; did the workshop process actually demonstrate critical self-reflection among the participants; and most importantly, could the project as a whole build lasting alliances for governance reform. All three are

²⁰ Over 700 villagers attended the village-level event. The Block level meetings were attended by representatives of 61 NGOs, 50 civil servants, 42 political party workers, and 69 social activists. The state-level meetings engaged a further 84 senior figures from these fields and academia, including 3 Ministers. DFID-India were represented at the state-level meetings by Arif Gauri (Governance Advisor): we are grateful for his personal involvement.

important in enhancing the political capabilities of participants and hence to the struggle for pro-poor governance.

Looking across the range of project recommendations, there was genuine innovation around changes in patterns of governance. Reform of the civil service itself was a key theme, with various recommendations for appropriate training, improved measures to strengthen accountability and tackle corruption. Beyond these changes, stakeholders had clearly been prompted to think about governance in terms of multiple-stakeholder action. For example, improving information flow about government activities was a key subject for debate, and suggested solutions included government sanctioned changes (including legal entitlements to information, and mandatory government channels of information provision), but also practical measures to set up parallel mechanisms for information dissemination in which NGOs, *panchayat* members and social activists would be active. This suggested a broader change in attitude among some non-governmental participants: they proposed taking up monitoring and advocacy roles vis-à-vis the state, and thus critical engagement with government was seen as a valued activity.²¹

This innovation was tempered by political realism throughout. For example, suggestions for improving direct grass-roots participation in government programmes were made with the caveat that participation was unsustainable without meaningful responses from higher levels of government. For the workshop respondents, effective grassroots participation had to deliver genuine benefits, and this meant changes extending beyond the village level. Concrete suggestions for changing Bihar's political culture were conspicuous by their relative paucity, but respondents expressed a strong desire for political change. Specifically, they wanted politicians to consult directly with the electorate and pay more attention to developmental activities that would benefit society in general, instead of focusing on caste-based support. Ambitious in their scope, the recommendations as a whole suggested that the workshops had prompted people to think differently about governance reform, and the fact that different concrete proposals were being put forward itself suggested that the 'culture of despair' surrounding Bihar can be challenged.

²¹ One example from an NGO representative summarised this change in attitude well:

“[Until now] we as activists have engaged in bringing out processions and rallies, offering *dharanas* (sit-ins), demonstrations, but without much result. To change the lives of poor people, the government system should be strengthened, people should be empowered with improved knowledge-base, public servants in the field should be supported against pressures of vested interests. This is all new to me.”

As well as producing innovative recommendations, the workshops had in some instances prompted self-reflection on the part of participants. For example, with regard to discussion on government capacity and accountability, many critical and innovative comments emerged from civil servants at all levels. This not only highlighted the great need for reform, but also showed the willingness of current staff to participate in this process. Significantly, the format of the workshops themselves had prompted requests for different working relationships between higher- and field-level government staff. Participants of all ranks favourably compared the frank, open and constructive dialogue that had existed within the workshops with the more hierarchical and distant relationships in their everyday roles, and noted the practical problems the latter caused. Changes in civil-service culture are unlikely to come about through these workshops alone, but again this demonstrated open thinking, and people's ability to imagine changes to their own working practices. Similarly, the relationship between NGOs and civil servants in Bhojpur had been distant and difficult, but by the end of the workshops each at least had some understanding of the constraints the other was working under.²²

Turning finally to the project's contribution to more permanent alliances for reform, it is here that our own influence over events was, and is, strictly limited. One particular problem was the timescale of the project itself: although DfID-India generously extended deadlines to accommodate political events on the ground,²³ we were still working within fixed parameters of a project defined by its workshops and the delivery of a final report. We were fortunate that this coincided with the re-introduction of *panchayati raj* within Bihar: thanks to the close involvement of the Secretary of the Department of Panchayats, participants' recommendations have fed in to the fine-tuning of *panchayat* legislation and procedures. Beyond this, participants' own actions will be central in further developing the project's aims.

²² As one of the workshop facilitators himself commented on the workshop presentations and discussion:

“This has made me rethink my entire experience of activism. As a social activist, for at least 20 years I have worked closely with common people at the grassroots. In all these years, I had believed that government had certain duties to towards people, and if those were not discharged properly, then that was government's failure by design. Never did I realise that different layers of government can function differently, and that there could be other pressures and pulls besides those emanating from a nexus of corrupt public servants and politicians, that could jeopardise its performance.”

²³ The creation of Jharkhand State from the southern Districts of Bihar (November 2000) and the holding of *panchayat* elections (April 2001) delayed the workshops, but possibly aided in their success. Both were massive events that indicated that things can and do change in Bihar.

Initial indications in late 2001 were that some ‘spin-off’ action was occurring involving NGOs,²⁴ but within the civil service individual participant’s autonomy is more restricted, making the shift from workshop recommendations to changed practice more difficult to effect.

The opposition to these pressures for reform can, unsurprisingly, be found among the group of participants who have most at stake within current dysfunctional patterns of governance, namely the higher-level politicians. Within the state-level plenary, these participants were remarkably candid in their acknowledgement of current problems, but many were equally frank in stating their unwillingness to change.²⁵ It was here that Chambers’ voluntaristic model of change model of individual change breaks down. These politicians were not about to undergo a ‘road to Damascus’ conversion to altruistic goals of participatory development as a result their presence in our workshops: their personal interests in the status quo were simply too great. Until and unless Bihar’s political leaders reshape the incentive structures of their own followers, change among this group is likely to come about through concerted external pressure rather than participation. It was here also that the tensions between our own roles, as facilitators/promoters of reform and as analysts assessing a somewhat depressing political landscape, came in to sharp relief. The fiscal shock of losing the mineral-rich Districts of southern Bihar to the new Jharkhand State and the re-launching of *panchayat* institutions may provide an opportune moment at which to press for reform, but resistance is likely to be stiff, and any gains uneven. We hope that our own role – in publicly stating problems in governance, and providing the space to think about alternatives – has faced these political realities. The recommendations for reform were not a ‘wish list’ we expected to be gifted from a newly-enlightened and benign political elite, but an agenda around which alliances will have to be consciously created, and struggles fought.

²⁴ In particular, two of the workshop facilitators supporting the team, Dipesh and Akshay, have integrated ideas developed in the workshop within their own NGOs’ activities. In future, Manoj Srivastava intends to extend the project’s work by setting up an advocacy NGO, but at present we are not directly involved in follow-up activities.

²⁵ There were some exceptions among representatives of various parties, as the following shows:

“In Bihar, confrontational politics is resorted to by the opposition parties. Still, I will see that my party workers disseminate information... on government programmes in a systematic manner, and raise their awareness about rights available to them within those programs. This would be done at the village level. But, before that I would like to call a meeting of Samata Party workers and thoroughly discuss the issues raised in the workshop... we would also like to join hands with other sections of society”

Post workshop feedback, State Council Member, Samata Party, Bhojpur

Conclusions: the entanglements of participatory activities

Participatory events provide particular moments of reflection/innovation for development professionals and others, and can be useful in building support for change. However, individual conversions to a self-reflexive developmental practice are unlikely to maintain any momentum once participants have returned from such events to their everyday working environment unless wider institutional changes are set in train. It is here that Chambers' own work leaves us with fewer clues. How should we evaluate strategic action to change institutional (rather than personal) cultures and practices? As we have indicated above, it is often the less tangible and controllable outcomes that are key to wider project success. But beyond Chambers' call to 'embrace uncertainty', what practical suggestions emerge from our experience?

Part of an answer no doubt comes from a participatory practice that does not aim for manufactured consensus, or the production of a set of technical solutions to governance problems. It is not just the content of our stakeholders' recommendations that matter: perhaps more important were the inter-group differences and tensions revealed and faced up to through their production. This explicit acknowledgement of the internal politics of participatory action research should also be accompanied by the realisation that 'group interests' are, to some degree, malleable and produced through the discussion process itself. As Kapoor (2002) notes, participation does not result in a Habermasian 'ideal speech situation' where collective decisions are made entirely through reasoned debate, but neither should the recognition that participation is political assume the existence of fixed interest groups with pre-determined stakes in events. Guiding and shaping the participatory processes through which re-alignments might come about is a delicate process within which critical self-reflection among the organisers is paramount. In Bihar, this meant stressing the possibilities for reform in a negative environment, and encouraging interaction between participants who would otherwise have treated each other with suspicion. Recognition of this process should also move us beyond polarized debates as to whether participation is a 'neutral' activity or the sinister tool of neo-colonial domination (Rahnema, 1992): when conducted properly, it is neither.

Beyond this, it is important to ensure that there is careful consideration of appropriate scales of action. Within the participatory development literature there is perhaps an implicit assumption that the more localised participatory events are, the more genuine or inclusive they become: reaching 'out' to disempowered groups necessarily means reaching 'down'. The written responses from villagers received within the project would indicate the fallacy of this position. They are acutely aware of their own lack of 'linking social capital', or political

leverage, and of the need for reform to start ‘at the top’ – in Patna or even Delhi – as well as ‘locally’. Part of a process of critical self-reflection for participants and facilitators alike should therefore be a consideration of the range of spatial scales at which action is required, and the alliances for change can be built. This is to take Moore and Putzel’s call for political analysis seriously, but simultaneously to recognise that the answers that emerge may not always reflect the enlightened central leadership and concerted grassroots pressure mentioned in WDR 2000/1. In Bhojpur, it is the community of NGOs and social activists who are likely to have the greatest freedom for action in struggles to enhance pro-poor governance. In doing so they will have to be inventive in finding allies among civil servants at all levels, and also from the local political elites newly-recruited to the *panchayat* institutions: search for support from state-level leaders still seems to be a forlorn hope.

Finally, given the severity of the problems of governance in Bihar, and the still uncertain nature of the follow-up activities that the action research has engendered, reflection on our own role as academics operating as practitioners/activists is also required. Was it foolhardy to undertake this project, and to emphasise the possibilities for change, in a State where international donors – including DFID – are reticent over engaging with the government? We suggest that it was not: within the action research we did not compromise or distort our academic findings, and highlighted rather than ignored Bihar’s difficulties in governance. But a move beyond detached analysis was also required from us to address these formidable problems. An important role academics can and *should* play – inside academia and beyond – is to help people imagine how things could be otherwise. Using academic research findings to debate alternative pathways towards reform does not provide solutions in itself, but it does allow a re-appraisal of governance issues. We argue that this is an important first step in enhancing the political capabilities of the poor, and those that would be their allies.

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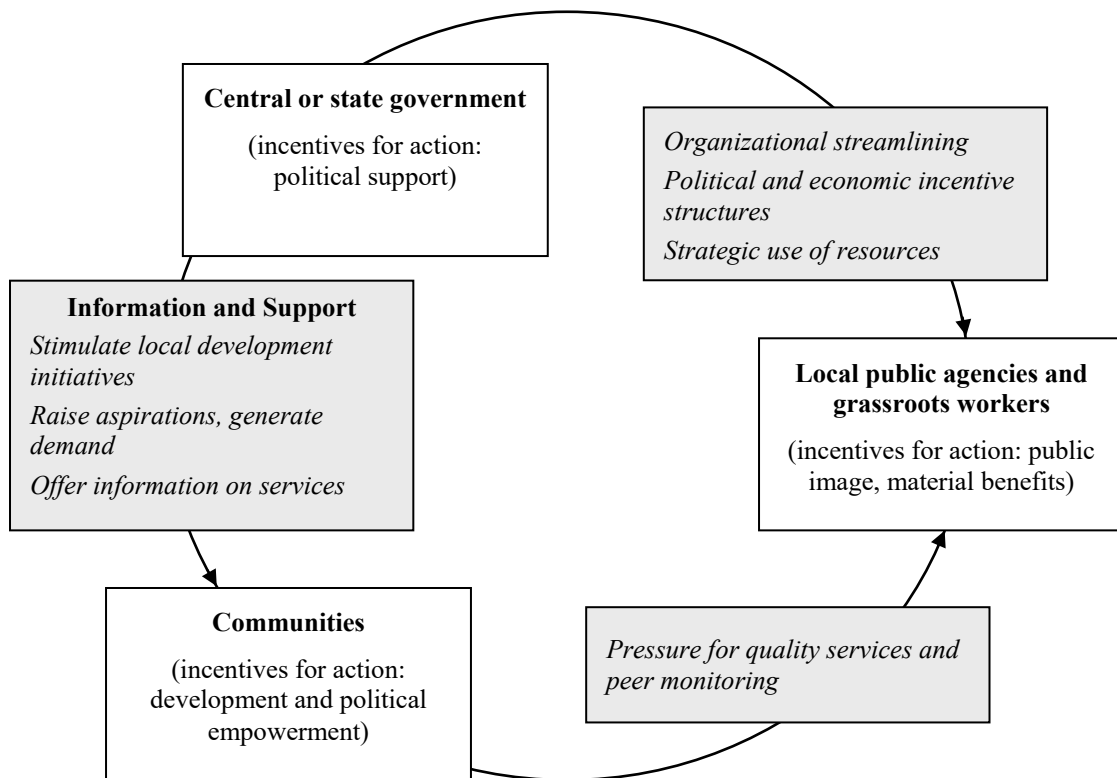
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Table 1: Problems and issues presented for discussion in the workshops

Main Issue for Discussion	Sub theme/specific points under each main issue
1. People's Empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can the knowledge-base of people be improved? 2. How can people's effective participation in the design and implementation of Govt. Program be ensured? How can this build poor people's trust in the participatory process, and overcome dysfunctional conflicts around the control and capture of government resources? 3. How can linkages be built (with higher level govt. departments and institutions, and with the market) to draw down the opportunities on offer (skills, resources, technology and market support) for a sustainable self-employment? 4. How can a network of pro-poor forces be built to support these initiatives, and intervene effectively in situations of the exclusion of common and poor people?
2. Government reform: moving towards pro-poor governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can government's institutional capacity be enhanced in a pro-poor direction? How can this build/improve pro-poor skills in government functionaries, and avoid overload on field staff? 2. How can interaction between different layers of government be improved, and creativity and innovation in government functioning promoted? 3. How can changes in current government practices be made to provide support and recognition to good intentioned efforts of field staff where these exist? 4. How can the accountability of government staff be improved? How can the 'culture of corruption' be challenged effectively?
3. Social and Political change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can the pervasive negative culture that sees 'capturing' Government programs for personal benefits as an end in itself be challenged? 2. What could be done to ensure that politics plays an important role in raising people's awareness of their rights and entitlements under Government programs? How can such a role be made rewarding for political representatives and activists? 3. How can development (social and economic) be brought to the top of political agenda? How can this displace caste as the main issue for political competition? 4. How can the negative nexus between political leaders/representatives and local middlemen be broken? How can politicians directly connect to common people to help their empowerment? 5. How can pressure be applied to political representatives to hold them more accountable to their voter-clients? How can the intervening period between two elections be used strategically to achieve this?

Source: Abridged from Srivastava et al. 2001, p.14

Figure 1: Pro-poor governance – a World Bank view



Source: World Development Report 2000/1 (World Bank, 2000) Figure 6.5, p.112

Figure 2: The Research Areas

[See map on separate Acrobat file]

Figure 3: The Action Research Process

