



World Urban Forum

Cities: Crossroads of Cultures

Inclusiveness and Empowerment?

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Dialogue On Civil Society's Contribution To Local Urban Governance

Reaping the long-term economic and social benefits of inclusiveness and empowerment

Over the past two decades, a consensus has emerged over the critical importance of involving civil society in governance, particularly at the local level. A number of initiatives have effectively enhanced the involvement of communities, neighbourhoods, social groups and associations in decision-making as well as in policy and programme implementation. The experience gained so far calls for closer review of this important dimension of governance.

Some cities already harness the latent force of the urban poor and assert their citizenship. To others, inclusiveness stands in the way of growth and efficiency. Immigration makes it more difficult to foster the role of civil society, as do municipal elitism and techno-bureaucracy. UN-HABITAT's own 27 years' experience of working with local authorities suggests a number of initiatives to overcome barriers to inclusiveness and empowerment.

Inclusiveness and empowerment

Civil society participates in local governance through inclusiveness and empowerment. Inclusiveness encompasses both political processes (including participatory democracy) and policy objectives (better living conditions, including for marginalized and minority communities). The resulting structures give everyone a share in the opportunities that cities have to offer, regardless of wealth, gender, age, race or religion.

Empowering civil society stakeholders is a precondition for inclusiveness. Authorities may have to take special action to enable civil society to participate effectively in the process of governance. Empowerment may require new institutions, new ways of working within existing organizations, and new rules for inter-organizational relationships.

The statutory option

The past decade has seen significant progress in the devolution of power, authority and resources to municipal authorities. However, most such initiatives have failed to reach out as far down as the community and neighbourhood levels, which is essential for the engagement of civil society.

Two exceptions stand out. Brazil's 2001 'Statute of the City' effectively entrenches the participation of citizens and civil society. The Philippines' 1991 Local Government Code is one of the more forward-looking statutes when it comes to strengthening local governance.

Softer alternatives

Institutional inventiveness and procedural reform can effectively enhance civil society involvement in local governance without imposing any radical or comprehensive legislative overhaul. Innovations can and do take place at the local level, such as establishing people's councils, participatory budgeting, city planning consultations, creation of savings and credit co-operative societies, and local-to-local dialogues.

Where local authorities are suspended or do not exist, as in Malaysia, Singapore or Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), inclusiveness is a policy issue rather than a governance process. However, inclusive governance has a good record of bringing greater equity, responsiveness and efficiency to local services. The costs of exclusion are higher than those of an inclusive political



process, since urban crime, proliferation of slums and squatter settlements and gender inequity all act as disincentives to investment and competitiveness.

Practical challenges

In practice, inclusiveness poses a number of challenges for city authorities. They must overcome elitist and gender dominance and deal with political patronage and its divisive tendencies. They face the perceived high resource requirements of inclusive decision-making.

Cities must also identify key stakeholders and interlocutors. The more powerful members of the community are frequently those in leadership positions. Their role is to articulate the concerns of the constituent groups, but they tend to leave out the more deprived.

The next step for cities is to balance the responsibilities of formal representative organs of government with the demands of diffuse interest groups. Collaboration has become the more popular form of relationship; as they define common goals and objectives, and collectively agree on strategies and action plans, civil society and cities forge a collaborative relationship in various policy areas. Overcoming the dichotomy between civil society and government and focusing on their intersection is crucial for success. Inclusiveness and empowerment also demand transparency and accountability.

Making it work

As Brazil's 'Statute of the City' shows, effective community empowerment can take place in the context of a national policy that levels the playing field for civil society and smoothes out any distortions in its relationship with local government. Bolivia, Britain and the Philippines are other good examples of successful devolution. The route of legal reform can be long and arduous, though, administrative reform can make a significant contribution, as shown in Argentina and the USA.

As part of its Global Campaign on Urban Governance, UN-HABITAT has developed a tool-kit to support participatory urban decision-making. The scheme takes a four-phase approach, including preparatory and stakeholder mobilization; issue prioritization and stakeholder commitment; strategy development and implementation; and follow-up and consolidation.

A future for 'new urbanism'?

The organization of urban space and the physical configuration of neighbourhoods reflect a community's relations within the city and can impinge on its development. In the developing world, the legacies of residential differentiation and rigid zoning have continued to exacerbate stark inequities, further compounding exclusion and alienation for a majority of urban residents.

A new movement, New Urbanism, is emerging that brings together planners, architects and developers. Among other things, it looks to restore a sense of neighbourhood and community empowerment. This movement advocates a renewed relationship between community building and building as an art, through citizen-based participatory planning and design. However, can 'New Urbanism' result in sustainable communities?

What about civic values?

Inclusiveness and the role of civil society are not just about policies and processes. If they are to work, some core participatory values must underpin them. Empowerment involves the promotion of civic standards and values that emphasize a sense of citizenship. Local authorities must promote a sense of trust, reciprocity and solidarity, which has nothing to do with consumerism. For all its many handicaps, the involvement of civil society in local governance is a necessary condition if the challenges of urban development are to be overcome.

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