

Global Future

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THIS EDITION

Pro-poor governance: the role of civil society

FEATURING

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Letter from a reader
Jon Hartley
POSTAGE

HOW ABOUT A BLOG?

Hi from New Zealand.

I wonder if you could collaborate your 10,000 readers through a blog?

This could become a very powerful tool of opinion.

Just a thought. Kind regards,

Jon Hartley
New Zealand

[Editor's reply: Thanks Jon for this suggestion, which we'll keep in mind as we consider ways to make Global Future more interactive. Meanwhile, we invite reader comments and feedback via the 'Contact us' link on www.globalfutureonline.org - and we'll publish one letter in each edition!]

what next? in number 1, 2007

The children's health crisis

Globally, health is in crisis. AIDS, TB and malaria continue to devastate entire societies and their economies. Child mortality remains unfinished business, with 10.5 million children aged under five dying of malaria, pneumonia or diarrhea each year. Maternal and neo-natal mortality continue to be huge global concerns.

Yet it is clear that most countries are not on track to reach the health targets of the Millennium Development Goals. Health care systems have been severely under-funded for decades; few governments of low-income countries commit enough of their budgets to deliver a basic package of health services to reach marginalised poor communities and their children. In recent years, the international community has increased funding, but this has not made serious inroads into the crisis.

Which health initiatives and approaches hold promise? What local, national and international investments are needed to ensure that all children can benefit from quality health care, prevention and treatment?

front cover image: A young woman studies the candidates at a polling station in the first direct elections for provincial leaders in Indonesia's tsunami-ravaged province of Aceh
photo: Maida Irawani/World Vision

facing page background image: People of Ipaumirim, Ceará, Brazil, marching in front of their municipal health secretariat for their right to a health post in their local community
photo: Carmilson Brito/World Vision

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THE MIDDLE CLASSES: UNLIKELY ALLIES FOR BETTER GOVERNANCE?

Robert Jenkins argues that alliances among classes are critical to achieving accountability and to ensuring that the poor benefit from governance reform.

It is widely understood that a country's institutions of governance profoundly affect both the nature of poverty and its degree of intractability. Malfunctioning public institutions can hinder growth, hamper service delivery and impede the administration of justice. A common response to this unhappy state of affairs has been to call for more transparent and accountable governance – everything from opening up budget-formulation processes to public scrutiny, to establishing specialised anti-corruption commissions.

That such reforms rarely yield the desired results has been a source of widespread concern. Much less attention has been paid to what is potentially a far more disturbing problem: even when civic engagement does improve transparency and accountability, this often does not translate into better governance for the poor.

DIVERGING AGENDAS

Civic actors come in all shapes and sizes. Radical campaigners are one variety: activists can be found championing the rights of landless and dispossessed people in countries as different as Kenya, Brazil and Nepal. But many, if not most, civil society actors are either professionalised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) pursuing mainstream development agendas or citizens' associations working on issues of concern to urban middle classes.

The preoccupations of such groups often diverge considerably. For instance, if a neighbourhood association prompts a successful initiative to improve municipal services in a relatively well-off part of São Paulo, Brazil, there may be no appreciable impact in a distant *favela*, even if the same public sector body is involved. Or if a local water authority institutes a system to prevent its engineers demanding bribes for services that should be free, it won't necessarily operate uniformly across the city. In decentralised service bureaucracies, officials may implement reforms only where not doing so would prove costly – that is, where constituents have influence with their bosses.

Furthermore, shifting political alignments and the natural turnover of officials tend to erode the original impetus for reforms, making ongoing participation a burden that ordinary citizens (and most associations) find impossible to sustain.

CROSS-CLASS ALLIANCES

If governance institutions are to operate more efficiently and equitably, different sectors of civil society must develop effective ways of working together. This means not only forming coalitions for lobbying purposes, but also re-orienting agendas to expand the range of stakeholders likely to benefit from any reform measure. In particular, alliances need to be forged between the middle classes and various groups among the poor.

Persuading pro-poor activists to address middle-class concerns is not easy, given a widespread perception that middle-class groups have largely ignored the impacts of market-oriented reforms on the economically marginal. Suspicion is heightened

by the tendency of even lower middle-class families in many countries to pull their children out of state-run schools and shun government health facilities. Having detached themselves from the public sector where market alternatives exist, middle-class groups are seen as having little stake in making its institutions function more efficiently.

Many activists view the middle classes as impediments rather than allies in promoting reform

Such impressions make cross-class alliances, and the more inclusive agendas that would sustain them, less likely. Yet a New Delhi-based movement for accountability, Parivartan, demonstrates how the divergent interests of poor and middle-class groups can be bridged. Formed by professionals and retired bureaucrats in 2000, Parivartan originally focused on mainly middle-class concerns – such as corruption in the income-tax bureaucracy. (In India only the comparatively well-off are subject to income tax.) Over time, however, Parivartan began addressing problems facing poorer groups, such as the lack of services in slum settlements, police harassment of street vendors and the non-availability of subsidised food. This dramatically expanded Parivartan's support base, yielding valuable new allies in its battles for better government.

Sociologists have long emphasised the role of middle-class groups in transitions to democracy. But they are just as important to improving the **quality** of democracy. In poor countries, however, the middle class cannot bring about change on its own. Unless activists and citizens' associations working on behalf of poor and middle-class groups find creative means of working together, sustainable pro-poor improvements in governance will remain a depressingly distant prospect. ■

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