

Comment

States, Societies, and Sociologists: Democratizing Knowledge from Above and Below

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In his presidential address, Jess Gilbert argues that big states, in alliance with social scientists, can work to democratize society. He points to two fascinating examples—the involvement of rural sociologists with local citizens for policy planning in the New Deal and similarly their role in the Farm Security Administration’s Resettlement Communities Program. Both programs, though short-lived in administrative terms, created an enduring legacy of how sociologists might engage in the shaping of progressive and participatory policy, and what governments can do to aid bottom-up community development under certain conditions. Gilbert shows that these initiatives not only made change *at the time* but *over time* they continue to contribute to the democratic imagination about the possibilities of change. One hopes that as a new presidential administration comes into office in the United States, such historical lessons will foster similar initiatives and similar opportunities for sociologists and states to join forces for progressive social change.

Such change happens neither through states nor society alone, but in their interaction—through “*combined* bottom-up, top-down initiatives,” as Gilbert puts it. If this is true, then the role of sociologists in contributing to change can be on either side of the state-society equation. Sometimes sociologists may join with state reformers to use their skills to promote policy change from within the state, as we see in Gilbert’s cases. But in other cases, the role of sociologists is a more participatory one within communities, whereby they use their skills and knowledge on behalf of civil society actors, who in turn demand and create change from below. In such cases, through participatory research, they work not only to democratize society through the state but to democratize the very knowledge base on which the state makes, implements, and sustains its policies in the first place.

Before coming back to discuss the role of sociologists in bringing about democratic change, I want to explore further the question of how change happens, by looking at some recent examples from outside the United States. The challenge of building responsive and accountable

states which in turn will work to alleviate poverty, protect rights, and tackle social injustice has dominated thinking in international development in recent years. Much of this work points toward improving the *institutions* of government—state agencies, legislative bodies, and justice systems. Yet evidence suggests that states are not built through institutional change alone. Organized citizens also play a critical role, through articulating their voice, mobilizing pressure for change, and monitoring government performance.

In a recent project, I have worked with colleagues in eight countries, all of which are much younger democracies than the United States, to explore further explore this question of how pro-poor and pro-social-justice state policies are brought about. We were interested in the role of civil society mobilization in contributing to policy change and state reform. We focused on cases where significant pro-poor and social justice policy changes clearly occurred in association with civil society engagement, and asked how did this occur?¹

The examples, as did those that Gilbert discusses from the U.S. New Deal, illustrate that state policy can make an important difference. For instance:

- In the Philippines, the National Campaign for Land Reform led to the redistribution of half the country's farmland to 3 million poor households, contributing to their economic rights and livelihoods.
- In South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign led to public recognition of HIV/AIDS issues and helped over 60,000 people benefit from publicly supplied anti-retroviral medicines.
- In Mexico, a campaign to reduce maternal mortality put the issue of maternal health care on the national agenda in an unprecedented way, contributing to important changes in national budget priorities and health-delivery mechanisms at the local level.
- In Chile, a campaign on child rights directed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) led to a new policy framework benefitting children, contributing to a decrease in child poverty.
- In India, a grassroots-inspired campaign led to the passage of the National Right to Information law in 2005, and then

¹ For this study and supporting case studies, see Institute for Development Studies (2008b).

to laws in nine Indian states, contributing to greater public accountability of governments.

- In Turkey, a campaign for women's rights led to a new penal code with 35 amendments for the protection of sexual rights.
- In Morocco, the women's social movement led a successful campaign for reform of the *moudawana*, the Islamic family law affecting women's rights.
- In Brazil, the Right to the City campaign established a national framework for citizen participation in urban planning, critical to achieving housing and other social rights for the urban poor.

While significant change happened in these cases, the direction of change is different from the New Deal examples that Gilbert discusses. In each of the above examples, the path to change started from below, through civil society-led mobilization, which contributed to significant state reform. But despite the fact that the analysis starts from the opposite side of the equation from Gilbert's argument, we arrive at similar places: that states play an important role, and that advocates for change inside the state are also critical. In fact, on closer scrutiny the case studies suggest that a dichotomous model of state-society is perhaps too simple. In practice, these spheres are closely interlinked, and change is highly iterative.

Within the state-society literature, there is a great deal of debate around the concept of "political opportunity" structure, that is, the argument that changes in the state create openings and possibilities for the emergence of social movements and collective action outside the state. Reading through this lens, one could interpret some of these cases in this way—the creation of more democratic states created new opportunities for policy engagement by civil society. In India, for example, competition among political parties for electoral victory led one party to incorporate in its political platform several of the reforms first articulated and pressed by civil society. In some cases, such as the Philippines, a change of government led to the appointment of officials and civil servants with progressive tendencies and this widened further the political spaces in which civil society could operate. In the best possible case, as in Chile, a new democratic government welcomed civil society as partner in a process of collaborative policy reform. On the other hand, while civil society organizations benefitted from the widening of political space in these cases, it is important to recognize that in Chile, South Africa, the Philippines, and Mexico, they also helped to shape the new political

opportunities through their prior involvement in the broad struggle for democracy.

The lesson, then, is that change over time was iterative, and came from the interaction of state and society pressures. Democratic openings created possibilities for citizen action, but citizen action in turn helped to make and shape those democratic openings. And even when political opportunities did arise, the case studies show that achieving change takes time, ranging from 3 to 20 years. Moreover, political opportunities are not necessarily fixed—in Morocco, Turkey, and South Africa, political openings were followed by political closures, just as in the New Deal. The challenge is not only how to bring about change but how to sustain it, which requires pressure from within the state and from outside as well.

The cases we examined also point to other factors that challenge the dichotomous approach to state and society. Much of our research suggests that these spheres are empirically overlapping and interacting, as suggested earlier. People on the inside of government often came from civil society. Some in government moved out to play roles in civil society. And, though in each of these cases citizen mobilization was important, the society-based actors did not create policy change on their own. Alliances with others were important.

Often those alliances were horizontal, for example with other civil society actors such as NGOs, community associations, and social movements. But other types of external alliances were also critical. For instance, in each of these cases, successful civil society mobilization involved building alliances with progressive figures from within government. Sometimes these alliances were publicly visible, but often they were behind the scenes. In recent work, I have explored the importance of such “champions of citizen participation” who, while inside government, work hard to keep the doors open for the participation and engagement of those on the outside.² Often such advocates face pressures from both sides—they are not quite trusted by civil society actors on the outside of government, but neither are they trusted from within, as they are seen as the allies of those outside the state. On the other hand, the relationship can also work both ways: not only can allies within government create opportunities and support for civil society actors, but civil society support can help consolidate the gains of progressive elements within government.

But a second type of alliance was also important. Nearly every case study found strong evidence that civil society was capable of producing

² For further information see Institute of Development Studies (2008a).

and mobilizing specialist knowledge that contributed to the overall quality of laws, policies, and programs ultimately implemented by governments. Unlike the cases Gilbert analyzed, where the academic specialist played a role inside the state, in these cases, the academic and technical specialists were usually allied with the civil society actors themselves. These specialists also performed two other critical functions that were necessary for the success of the campaigns described in the case studies. First, they provided legitimacy to the campaigns and ensured that governments could not dismiss out of hand the claims being made by civil society. Second, they contributed to broader patterns of public education through the media, or through direct work with public organizations. In these latter cases, the role of the academic was not to support more democratic policies directly, but to help to mobilize and strengthen the knowledge of ordinary citizens, who in turn contributed to policy change.

This latter approach is one deeply informed by traditions of participatory action research. Participatory research is driven by a view of democracy built on the agency of ordinary citizens, and insists on the participation of those citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Yet it goes one step further—it argues that democratic knowledge is an important foundation of democratic participation and policy making. Whose knowledge is used for policy formation is as important as who participates in the process of change. The role of the sociologist in such cases is not only to use his or her professional knowledge to democratize society but also to help support the creation of democratic knowledge itself.³ One could, for instance, look at the same New Deal period as Gilbert does and point to the work of Myles Horton, who left his study of sociology at the University of Chicago to start the Highlander Center in Tennessee in 1932. Unlike the sociologists who worked inside the state whom Gilbert applauds, Horton chose to use his skills and commitments to empower poor and disenfranchised citizens to use their knowledge and leadership to bring about change from below. The choices may not be either-or; successful change over time may require both.

Two other lessons emerging from the international cases of how policy changes happen are also important. First, the more contentious the issue, the more contentious the change process will be. In the cases of maternal mortality in Mexico, child rights in Chile, and urban planning in Brazil there was little contention about the issues themselves. The challenges were more over implementation and the

³ For further argument along these lines, see Gaventa and Cornwall (2006).

campaigns more of a technical and informational nature, led by professional NGOs at the national level. Here the sympathetic academic could work in collaboration with the state as a policy expert, without a great deal of risk to his or own career.

But in other cases—land redistribution in the Philippines, HIV/AIDS in South Africa, the right to information in India, or women’s rights in highly conservative environments in Turkey and Morocco—the issues were initially highly contentious, and evoked clear divisions of interests within society. Campaigns required a greater focus on collective action and popular mobilization, as well as skillful use of high-profile media. They also often involved conflict and antagonism, rather than more comfortable partnerships with government. This kind of advocacy required strong, relatively independent civil society actors who could challenge and hold their own against powerful interests. The risks of engagement were high, including for the academic or technical allies. As was the case with those reformers in the New Deal who took on contentious issues of land and race, change was not to come easily nor comfortably.

Because of this, our cases suggest, the creation of enduring and sustained change requires support from society, as well as support from the state. For some advocacy organizations, success is defined literally and narrowly as tangible victories in terms of policy language or new laws at the national level. For others it is seen more robustly as including more societal-based outcomes, such as greater citizen awareness or stronger grassroots organizations built through the process of policy mobilization. Building grassroots constituencies for change—people who can monitor government performance and demand their policy rights—can be as important in the long term as winning a particular issue or making changes in government policies themselves. The more that campaigns create the capacity of grassroots citizens to express their voice, claim their rights, and demand accountability from the state, the more likely that the policies will make a difference in communities, be owned by the public, and remain in place. And the more effectively national policy reforms are implemented, the more likely they are to translate into material improvements in people’s lives and to gain popular support. The role for sociologists who seek to contribute to change can be at any place along this state–society continuum.

References

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