

The Local Politics of Public Action: Relationships, Bargains and the Question of ‘Impact’

Naomi Hossain

Abstract The concluding contribution to this *IDS Bulletin* draws together the themes and findings from the eight country case studies. It reflects on the choice of the framing notion of ‘public action’ as distinct from a focus on ‘civil society’, as an alternative and more appropriate frame of reference for the hybrid forms of change in local governance witnessed through these cases. Three main wider contributions of the research are identified. First, as action research, some of the cases offer fresh perspectives on processes of change, often from the valuable perspectives of insiders or engaged practitioners. Second, the cases collectively provide striking new insights into how relationships are built to bolster alliances, strike bargains, and develop trust between actors engaged in local governance reform. Third, the article draws together the case study findings to develop a working typology of the impacts of local democratic governance reform on poverty, inequality and exclusion.

1 Introduction

There are no clean lines in this *IDS Bulletin*. This collection of accounts of local governance initiatives is full of messy storylines that never quite reach resolution; of actors that fail to fit the tidy categories required of development policy analysis; of ambiguous political positions. It is a diverse set of stories of change, and that diversity reflects the ground realities of governance reform as the LogoLink partners have known it. Each of these accounts is embedded within its own political history and sociocultural logic: can the story of a network that mandates Sichuan urban government to provide urban services to rural migrants speak to rural South African action-research using scorecards to bring water and sanitation services? What do they have in common? Above all, in an era of development information overload, when it is not enough to invoke the virtues of diversity and the importance of context, what general lessons do they offer about the project of building democratic local governance to tackle poverty, inequality and exclusion? This question merits particular attention, given that this is one of several recent *IDS Bulletins* to have addressed questions of local

governance reform, accountability and new democratic spaces.¹ What does the present set of cases add to these debates?

This concluding article addresses this question by attempting to draw some general conclusions from these diverse accounts of change in local democratic governance. It identifies three points on which the cases in this *IDS Bulletin* collectively contribute to our understanding on these issues:

- 1 Directing attention to new, grounded evidence, including from some insider perspectives, and on geographical areas about which to date relatively little has been known.
- 2 Highlighting the analytical centrality of the relationships the actors negotiate, as distinct from a focus on their institutional forms and presumed normative intent. This affirms the iterative, bargaining qualities of governance reforms.
- 3 Enabling a mapping of categories or types of ‘impact’ at the local level, including consideration of timeframes, to contribute to the thorny but policy-relevant question of ‘what difference does this make?’

2 From civil society to public action via political society

This concluding contribution will look at each of these in turn. But first, it sketches a key theme that has framed our overall thinking on these issues. Our (the LogoLink Research Group's) collective reading of these debates, in light of our discussion of the case studies in this *IDS Bulletin*, has motivated the selection – or resurrection – of the term 'public action' as a framing concept for what we have been observing on the ground.² Below will be a brief discussion about why 'public action' might be more useful – less unhelpfully normative and prescriptive – than, perhaps 'civil society action' or 'participation'. But let us first consider where we were in discussions of 'civil society', as it is from this concept, perhaps, the LogoLink research project could be seen as trying to depart.

It may be fitting that 'public action' has been borrowed (again) from non-English language traditions of political thought and practice (Spink and Best, this *IDS Bulletin*): it was substantially English-speaking development thought that saddled governance in development with normative notions of civil society as the helpmeet of neoliberal development that has been criticised as contextually irrelevant, analytically inadequate and in general, depoliticised:

Within development studies, civil society has been predominantly understood in two main ways, at each of two main levels ... At the level of ideology and theory, the notion of civil society has flourished most fruitfully within either the neoliberal school of thought that advocates a reduced role for the state or a post-Marxist/post-structural approach that emphasizes the transformative potential of social movements within civil society. At the conceptual level, civil society is usually treated in terms of associations (so-called civil society organizations), or as an arena within which ideas about the ordering of social life are debated and contested (Bebbington *et al.* 2008: 6).³

Civil society had become a 'consensual "hurrah" word' (Chandhoke 2007: 608), an unarguable good, presumed to embody many social and political virtues of development. This was the situation through the late 1990s and much of the

2000s. But times have changed, and aid donors no longer appear so supportive of civil society, particularly in the context of the rise of the security agenda (Howell 2006; Howell *et al.* 2008). The new coldness towards civil society with respect to aid and development agendas raises the question: is civil society 'in' or 'out'? (Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006: 667).

A more critical set of concerns about the treatment of 'civil society' has been its effective removal of poor people's struggles from the heart of the action: national politics and state action. The 'radical polycentrism' within which civil society came to the fore embodied a faith in 'a minimalist (night watchman) state and in a political democracy in which civil society limits (rather than builds) public authority' (Houtzager 2005: 4). This created a disconnection between the prescription of local action in response to poverty and the powerful global forces that actually shape most people's lives. The project of reducing poverty through community organisation is one Houtzager finds 'hopelessly naive' (2005: 6). This is perhaps particularly acute, given that aid to civil society has so frequently meant aid to NGOs, and 'NGOisation' has frequently had depoliticising effects on the organisation of the poor.⁴ The promotion of institutionalised forms of depoliticised public participation, often in support of toothless mechanisms of accountability, have been part of this process. On the Poverty Reduction Strategy processes, Hickey and Mohan (2008: 251) note that these mechanisms 'offer arguably the weakest forms and levels of accountability, in terms of their capacity to ensure the answerability of power-holders or the enforceability of conditions upon them'.

Against this critical withdrawal from civil society as at least partly implicated in a depoliticised framing of participation, the LogoLink research project was from the start geared towards recognising core actors in local democratic governance reform as part of political society. The need to focus on relationships that traverse the often false distinction between civil and political society emerged as a focus on how political actors at regional, national institutional, and local levels interact, negotiate support, build alliances, and struggle with each other.⁵ These case studies are informed by the recognition that, as Partha Chatterjee reminds us, the

‘politics of the governed’ is a political preoccupation with resources, and is in this respect different from – and often at odds with – the political preoccupations of elite civil society, with its focus on civil and political rights and duties (Chatterjee 2004).

The limitations of formal participation mediated through a neutered set of civil society forms and practices were felt by the members of this group – often at firsthand, as civil society actors themselves. This meant agreement that the research should explicitly seek to understand the political action at different levels that animates local governance reforms. This meant recognising that it is often precisely through their engagements with state and political actors that civil society had its most force (see Lavallo *et al.* 2005). And it meant looking at how and whether ‘successful’ action on poverty, exclusion and inequality meant civil society alliances with these political actors;⁶ if so, how and on what basis were bargains struck that delivered the goods, and that did so in ways that strengthened citizenship and empowered people politically, rather than by enhancing their rights as user-choosers-consumers of services (World Bank 2003; Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

In addition to looking at the place of political society in governance reform, the cases contain a strong element of co-governance and co-production, including co-financing. Again, this reflects the ‘bias’ in the cases towards local initiatives that have helped to create a more enabling environment to tackle poverty, inequality and exclusion: co-governance in the sense of the ‘active involvement of civil society’ to strengthen state institutions (Ackerman 2004: 458).

It is partly for this reason that an overall description of what we have seen here as ‘hybrid public action’ seemed to fit the overall story of citizens, communities and organisations striking bargains, building alliances or struggling to establish new mandates and standards for public accountability (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). The ‘public’ in this use refers above all to a sense that citizens and society are firmly part of the action of governance reform, and that this is not the domain of state and political society alone. The use is therefore less about signalling a conceptual advance, than, more modestly, about finding a hat with a better fit.

3 Privileged perspectives on public action: the value of insider/action research

The character of this research and its methodology is itself distinctive within these debates. The LogoLink research group viewed the *IDS Bulletin* as an opportunity to disseminate the results of research undertaken from distinctly Southern agendas and perspectives to a far wider audience than such research often reaches. There were common questions linking these case studies: exploring the relationships between civil and political society, the nature of the political support and champions necessary for effective co-governance, particularly with respect to engineering an institutional ‘fit’ between local demands and public institutional practice (Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Houtzager *et al.* 2008). But there was also a strong sense that much could be learned inductively, by what Esguerra and Villaneuva (this *IDS Bulletin*) term ‘building theory from the ground up’. What was important was not predetermined: case selection was determined by the country researchers, and the focus and approach varied, depending on what spoke most directly to *national* debates and concerns around governance. The core issue was tackling violence against women in Mexico, therefore, while in the Philippines the focus was on public financial resource allocation rules, and their impacts on co-governance. In both South Africa and Uganda, the cases dwell interestingly on disappointment over the failures of new officially sanctioned participatory spaces to deliver material outcomes. In the case from China, some of the central questions revolve around the relevance of ideas of ‘civil society’ to the network to support rural migrants’ rights.

One motivation for this *IDS Bulletin* was the sense that the character and methodology of this research contributed a fresh perspective on local democratic governance reform because it often came from a privileged, often insider position. Some of the cases are about areas in which innovations in popular governance have largely gone unnoticed to date.

An example is the Anta province of Peru, the context for which Grompone and Glave (this *IDS Bulletin*) set with their sketch of the politics of participation at the regional, national and local level. The Anta experience is nested within the wider process of radical change ongoing across the Andean region, where Grompone and Glave

note, political leaders claim to be building the 'foundational principles of a new political and social order'. As an instance of co-governance it is particularly striking because it documents how some municipalities began to move well beyond the participatory sphere, to create market linkages for agricultural producers. Governance reforms that result in such direct public entry into agricultural markets seem unlikely to feature among 'success stories' selected to promote a good governance and neoliberal economic policy agenda. It was a choice of case that seems unlikely to have come from research originating in Washington DC or London or Madrid. In the Anta province case, it seems clear why it has been so important that the reforms deliver real material gains (tangible improvements in service delivery and improved access to agricultural markets): the main political champion of reform came himself from a background in peasant politics and civil society organising.

Grompone and Glave's case permits privileged access to how this process unfolded from the perspective of some key players in this process.⁷ In so doing, it also conveys a sense of the uncertainty and sense of experimentation that characterised the process. Anta is no Porto Alegre, multiply analysed and dissected; perhaps because Anta is not widely known as a great success story, our minds do not automatically seek the factors behind its success. Instead, we are given glimpses of what usually falls away in such cases, particularly accounts of 'success': reluctance to participate, apparently insurmountable power inequalities; mistakes made, and the challenges of maintaining popular support over time. In the Peru case, the 'success' seems to be at least partly the wide recognition that this is, and will always be, a work in progress.

A second example is the striking but little known case of *Communitisation* in Nagaland, about which little has to date been written. There remain many interesting questions to be asked about the Nagaland experience. These include questions about the politics of the *Communitisation* reform initiative at the state level: what were the motivations and strategy of the champions and initiators of this strategy of co-governance? How did security threats and the persistent failure of public service delivery in the state feature in the political calculations? At the meso level, it is interesting to consider the political consequences

of this alliance between the state government, district administration and village governance institutions: the researchers noted little involvement of state political parties and NGOs at local level to date, an absence which deserves to be explored in more detail. And at the village level, it is worth exploring further whether assumptions about the intrinsically participatory and democratic practices of consultation, dialogue and consensus-building understood to characterise traditional Naga governance do in fact hold up in practice, over time, and in relation to complex resource management practices.

Most of the authors have been relatively reticent about their own roles in the public actions that they describe. But in three of the cases, those of the Citizen Voice Project in South Africa, the work in the Philippines of the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD), and the Ugandan DENIVA network's experience with its local partner, Pressure From Below, we see more clearly how the research is embedded within the action itself. At times, this creates the possibility of frank appraisals of the shortcomings of participatory local governance initiatives. Hemson and Buccus (this *IDS Bulletin*) were part of the Citizen Voice Project in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, and the research was firmly embedded within the mobilisation process. The project had gone some way towards strengthening accountability in public water services by establishing (or re-stating) the mandate for local government to supply water, setting standards for service provision and developing capacity to monitor supply (some key elements of public accountability, as set out by Goetz and Jenkins 2005). These are clearly valuable gains in terms of new political capabilities for accountability.

Hemson and Buccus acknowledge these gains. But they seem distinctly unimpressed, overall, with the achievements of their project. This may be because they experienced, first-hand, the palpable disappointment among community members that results had not been faster; the urgency of the need for immediate results for the poor; both clearly conveyed in this account. There is always the possibility, as the authors point out, that disappointment with the immediate outcomes may lead to disillusionment with participation more generally. The interesting aspect of this action-research positioning is that, as scholars and experts on

Table 1 Case study links between local actors and wider policy networks

Case	Wider policy networks
Brazil	Workers party, social organisations
China	Social Science Research Council, UNESCO
India	State government
Mexico	State government, civil society networks
The Philippines	Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD), radical political parties, links with national politicians
Peru	Local political parties, broad social organisations
South Africa	Universities
Uganda	Ugandan CSO and NGO network DENIVA

local government, Hemson and Buccus are able to combine their empathetic disappointment with an analysis of the critical systemic blockages that prevent local accountability from translating into responsive policies at higher levels, in the form of coordination failures between different tiers of local government.

There is a similar guardedness in the research into the work of their partner organisation Pressure From Below, in the Ugandan case. Namisi and Kasiko (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe the tricky dance that their analysis leads them to conclude will be necessary if Pressure From Below is to continue to add value. It has done so to date by furthering locally driven advocacy agendas through the greater access afforded by their connections to larger networks. It will need to maintain its groundedness within communities to remain legitimate, and it should get too close neither to NGOs seeking alliances nor to council officials, in order to remain locally relevant. The authors survey this scene partly with an eye to its policy lessons: how can outsiders, including networks like their own, support organisations like this reactive, agile group without undermining their accountability to the communities, or that between citizens and state?

4 New relationships: building alliances, making bargains, developing trust

A second way in which the cases here contribute to these debates is through insights into the relationships that galvanise pro-poor change, broadly conceived.

Following Houtzager (2005) and Houtzager *et al.* (2008), our cases seem to support the view that

local actors are better able to effect accountability (both answerability and enforcement) when they are linked into larger policy networks; yet such linkages may also be most effective when they genuinely connect with the local politics of accountability. Partly by virtue of their selection by LogoLink partners, and partly because of their own higher-level policy linkages, all of the cases were connected to larger policy networks (see Table 1).

An important point that seems to emerge from the cases here is that the establishment of mandates are an important part of an accountability framework; yet *how* people succeed in enforcing that accountability at the local level seems to be a far more varied story. What those strategies look like and how much power of enforcement they possess are empirical questions, ‘an emanation from social practice rather than from theory’ (Jayal 2008: 109). Because social accountability is about a wide, varied set of accountability relations, it makes sense that a wide and varied set of strategies are adopted to achieve its ends. In the Sichuan case, for example, the media portrays migrant workers in sympathetic poses – the children in front of their demolished school on the first day of term, dramatising the schooling problems of migrants. Such sympathetic portrayals are important because the problems faced by migrants include broader issues of social exclusion, and suspicions and negative attitudes of the wider urban community (Ming, this *IDS Bulletin*). To establish a mandate for urban local government to provide services to migrants, therefore, requires representing this group as ‘deserving’ of support to the wider community.

In a number of the cases, it is through highly informal, face-to-face means that accountability effects are achieved. Esguerra and Villanueva (this *IDS Bulletin*) offer glimpses into activists' informal strategies: we see researchers and Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD) staff in discussion with the Mayor; cooperative members plan to invite the Mayor's son to lunch to discuss their plans further; city residents without piped water ridicule corrupt politicians who sell them trucks of water. In Jinja, Uganda, elected officials beat up employees of corrupt contractors on civic works sites; the news reporter captures the dialogue during the fight in such detail as to give rise to suspicion that the fight may have been staged. In Diadema in Brazil, when the government Company of Urban and Housing Development (CDHU) failed to release funds, housing movement activists camped outside the company until under this and other pressures, the funds were released.

The cases illustrate a number of the informal pressures for accountability that shape frontline service delivery, which may include personal social status, fear of 'the crowd' or media exposure, reputation and private income, and political capital (Corbridge *et al.* 2005; Tsai 2007). In many ways, these informal pressures echoed with my own research into service delivery for the Bangladeshi poor. These informal pressures can be potent, viewed closely; but of the many ways in which they shape service delivery, not all are positive, in the short- or the long-term (Hossain 2009). These face-to-face, informal sites of bargaining and negotiation highlight the iterative nature of these reform processes: again in the Philippines case, we see how a participatory planning process takes hold in one community under conditions when the mayor needs guarantees of popular political support; but there is no guarantee, the authors note, that participatory planning will survive into the tenure of his successor, and the bargaining may need to start again. In the housing movement in Diadema, Brazil, the process of bargaining has persisted through several local government tenures, including at least one with which the movement was not allied. More than the others, the Diadema case, with its longer time-span, illustrates the peaks and troughs of popular organising, documenting the movement's reversals as closely as its triumphs.

Changes in the quality of as well as the power within relationships of accountability make a clear difference to service delivery and responsiveness. In some cases this is explicitly sought: in Nagaland, 'trust' in communities to effectively manage their own affairs was one of four principles the administration cited as guiding the initiative (Singh and Jha, this *IDS Bulletin*). In the Anta province, the citizen-led process politely and usefully included municipality actors to provide technical expertise, in an important but distinct phase of planning processes (Grompone and Glave, this *IDS Bulletin*). In many of these contexts, it proved important that administrative officials should be broadly aligned with the goals of the initiative, and at least informed and/or consulted.⁸ State actors – politicians and bureaucrats – emerge from many of these accounts in shades of grey, and only rarely as venal rent-seekers (on the one hand) or much sought after pro-poor champions or 'drivers' of change (on the other).⁹ We get a more real, and in many ways a more mundane perspective on the response of state actors to governance innovations with empowering potential: alliances can be built when there are spaces in which to identify shared interests. In a number of cases, bargains have been struck that are not of the purest intent. It may be for this reason that an activist in Veracruz in Mexico reports to Paz Cuevas (this *IDS Bulletin*) her concerns that the gains made in promoting women's rights to lives without violence might be used for political purposes, possibly subordinated to political ends. The bargains are continually being renegotiated.

Despite disappointment with new democratic spaces in the 'participatory sphere' (Cornwall and Coelho 2007), some spaces discussed in the cases here are making it possible for local actors to connect with larger policy networks; in others, the spaces play a more local deliberative role, enabling an aggregation and articulation of interests (Nagaland, Anta, Mbizana, Sichuan), and a space for debate without conflict (Anta). These participatory spaces have at the least improved transparency at the local level.

In the Philippines, the examples discussed are part of a more ambitious governance agenda. This has, as its immediate target, public financial policymaking, but it is framed by the larger goal of tackling the patronage basis of political

relations between the centre and the local. The aim is to challenge rules and practices that feed patronage relations and thereby undermine community capacities for co-governance. At the heart of Esguerra and Villanueva's account is an analysis of how resources for local development are worked into the patronage resources of national and local politicians. Proposals for new rules on resource allocation to local governments emphasise transparency, lack of discretion and tackling inequality. We see in Esguerra and Villanueva's account the contrast in public goods provision between the political settlements achieved in places where patronage has been replaced by participatory planning (motivated by threats to political survival), as distinct from those where it has proven impossible to shake off old patronage practices.

Some of our cases have conformed more to a pattern of social mobilisation around collective, politicised social organisations; not surprisingly, Brazil and Peru are the key cases here. This includes some connections to programmatic political parties, a link which is particularly prominent in the Brazilian case of Diadema, itself a direct base for the national Workers' Party. While the experiences of Diadema have translated into policies and programmes in other urban settings in Brazil, the Anta experiences of Peru do not appear to have done so; very likely a reflection of the more fragmented nature of political parties there. However, while some of these may be formerly national, it is often specific local or meso-level arrangements and profiles that are key. The Indian case reflects a state programmatic agenda, apparently developed with little intermediation of civil or political society at this level. The 'missing middle' of civic and political actors in the Nagaland case is striking; it recalls Houtzager *et al.*'s point that state anti-poverty schemes have attempted to establish direct relationships between implementing agencies and 'beneficiaries', thereby 'eliminating the mediation of what is considered 'bad' civil society' (2008: 7). In the Nagaland case, both NGOs and political groups are ousted from the picture. Here we witness the building of new forms of political authority within the Village Councils and Village Development Boards; actors in these institutions in turn build direct new relationships with officials at district and higher levels.

The strengthening of local political authority is a theme in several of the other cases: in South Africa, building capacity to document and monitor water and sanitation services and to negotiate with district officials has built new political capacities. This has strengthened the authority of traditional leaders as well as of a new group of actors, mostly women, who have acquired new authority through their skills with participatory research into community concerns. In the Peru case, too, the authority to govern on behalf of communities has also widened, again to include more women than in the past. In the Anta case, women's new political authority has meant significant challenges to basic political cultural practices: for instance, while the language of public fora has traditionally been Spanish (spoken by male leaders), this has increasingly had to be replaced with Quechuan (spoken by community women).

One source of responsiveness may be the larger political imperatives of security and development within which accountability struggles are staged in many of these cases. It is hard to explain the drive to 'communitise' public services in Nagaland without recognising the security-development urgency implicit within such an initiative (Singh and Jha, this *IDS Bulletin*). The social unrest anticipated from discontented rural migrant workers in urban Sichuan is, similarly, the relevant backdrop to the picture of urban local government officials engaging in new spaces and negotiation of new entitlements for migrant workers. In the Eastern Cape, it is the acknowledged disillusionment with democracy among the poor and marginal that animates the case of the water service scorecards: when it is clearly so difficult to affect change through participatory local action in this context, the authors might ask, what does it mean when people are so widely disillusioned with democracy? What might the alternatives be? These were questions freighted with the political events of the movement, as the ruling African National Congress began to fragment in 2008.

5 The question of 'impact'

This *IDS Bulletin* takes the issue of impact – in the 'hard' sense of tackling poverty, inequality and exclusion – very seriously. While by no means insensitive to the importance of processes or unaware of the need for realism in the timeframes for such change, many case study authors

Table 2 A typology of impacts of local governance reforms on public services

	Political		Administrative/	
Category of 'impact'	Establishing or strengthening mandates for service delivery	Establishing rights to participation in service delivery (e.g. co-governance agreements)	Setting standards for services	Building capacity to monitor
Brazil	Local government assigned responsibility for social housing	Housing association and social organisation representation is institutionalised within urban and housing policy spaces	Including standards for public utilities, social spaces	Built through housing associations and local networks
China	Urban local government accepts new responsibilities for migrant workers	Local government resists private provision of education; this has spurred action to enable migrant children to attend public schools	Dialogue around safety standards for private migrant worker schools	To date mainly through the network
Peru		Yes	Yes, including standards on pollution	Each project automatically generates a committee to monitor its activities
The Philippines		Some gains at the local political level, but may rest on fragile political alliances	Acceptable water service standards defined	Through water cooperatives
South Africa		Constitutionally guaranteed but implementation has been disappointing	Acceptable water service standards defined	Capacities build for participatory research within communities; scorecard methodology developed indicators
Uganda		Constitutionally guaranteed but implementation has been disappointing	To some extent	Village representatives recruited to monitor services

public management	'Material'/developmental		
Creating viable mechanisms for correcting service delivery failures	Improved relations between service-providers and citizens	New services	Better quality/more efficient services
New institutions and laws developed with mandates to act on urban and housing issues	Close communication through Housing Fund Council; officials develop an integrated approach to urban/housing services	Land title regularisation, housing, roads, public utilities, social sector services; new focus on local economic development	Yes
Through social accountability, e.g. media pressure	Communication between urban government officials and migrant worker representatives improving	New access to state schools, training programmes	
	Technical expertise has been subordinated to local political priorities; appears to be a fruitful relationship	New agricultural market linkages, tackling environmental issues, pollution	Yes
Some local political sanctions possible, but only when political survival is at stake	Informally, relationships between key actors are strengthened. But the challenge is to reform patronage		Some
No	Improved communication between communities and official actors, but failed to address coordination between different tiers of local government		No
Through media pressure and links to higher levels; nothing institutionalised	Yes		Some responses that have adapted service delivery mechanisms (e.g. efforts to improve health centre staff accommodation)

emphasise the urgent importance of material outcomes from these initiatives. There is an insistence, here, on judging local governance reform initiatives against performance in terms of its contribution to material wellbeing, and not only in terms of improved governance processes.¹⁰ This insistence is consistent with the action-research elements of the research, as the researchers were in direct contact with ‘beneficiaries’, whose expectations had been raised by the participatory processes in which they were involved. In this insistence on the urgency of material outcomes as standards against which to judge participatory processes, the present *IDS Bulletin* is in-line with a general move towards evaluating participatory governance reforms to include their development outcomes:

Enhancing voice and accountability can therefore have an impact on poverty in two ways. Firstly, increasing voice and accountability can directly reduce poverty because powerlessness is a constitutive aspect of poverty. Secondly, voice and accountability can indirectly contribute to poverty reduction through its contribution to other objectives, for instance by supporting a governance environment in which poor people are able to voice their interests and participate in public discussions, leading to more pro-poor policies. (O’Neill *et al.* 2007: 9–10)

In this *IDS Bulletin*, while the authors recognise the importance of tackling powerlessness as a ‘constitutive aspect of poverty’, it seems to be difficult to make a case for participation for its own sake, and they do not lose sight of the crucial importance of delivering real service improvements. But there are a range of other consequences, both immediate and longer term, which also constitute impact. Table 2 is an attempt to categorise these ‘impacts’ in terms of their role in strengthening local accountability. The focus here is not on whether or not participation takes place or on the existence of ‘new democratic spaces’ (Cornwall and Coelho 2007) for consultation or deliberation, but in what is achieved in those spaces along several dimensions of an accountability relationship, borrowing from Goetz and Jenkins’ (2005) framework of accountability which emphasises the establishment of mandates, setting of standards, capacity to monitor and mechanisms for correction.

Table 2 suggests that many of the initiatives explored here are working along several of these dimensions of accountability simultaneously.

One crucial dimension of accountability that Table 2 cannot capture is the iterative, bargaining nature of governance reforms which evolve over time (Unsworth, cited in O’Neill *et al.* 2007: 11). The focus here on the relationships between actors makes it possible to observe this bargaining a bit more closely – helped by the fact that some of the researchers are themselves actors, parties to the bargain.

It is important to recognise two aspects of these bargains. First, deals are never finally sealed, and transactions never quite complete in the process of bargaining between citizens and state institutions. The bargaining is itself the stuff of the accountability mechanism. This is one reason why the cases here vary enormously in terms of the timeframe they take into account, ranging from the intervention of a year in the South African case, to a 20-year period in Brazil. Second, these bargaining processes do not start at the point of the project intervention but are rooted in a history of older relationships, which mark and shape the starting position for the bargain. In many of these contexts, this history is a silent signifier in the background; so big and so important and so constitutive of the relationship as to disappear into the background: the history of unresolved conflict and insurgency in Nagaland; the legacy of apartheid and the striking notion of the ‘second democracy’ in South Africa; the underlying threat of social unrest, exemplified by direct action and protests in China, with migrant workers jumping off buildings in a final expression of absolute frustration. There are equivalent examples for Peru, Mexico, Brazil and Uganda. The back-story of the bargains that we can actually see is the real history of these relationships. They may not be visible – or deemed policy-relevant – to the design of aided interventions to promote voice and accountability. In these accounts, they inform the terms of the bargain. They help us to make sense of an alignment of actors around changes in governance that cannot usefully or exclusively be explained with reference to the technical, poverty reduction or development policy outcomes. We come close in these cases to witnessing the ground politics of public action.

6 Conclusions

There is a notable absence of aid from these case studies, which may help to explain why few of these initiatives are of the 'user group' variety, set up by technical units in support of specific programmes (Goetz and Gaventa 2001; Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). This does not deny that the 'user group' model is still very important in development thought and development practice. This absence probably reflects, if anything, a bias against these types of participatory initiative because of the criterion of 'success' in strengthening the environment for tackling poverty, exclusion and inequality. It is notable that the two instances given here that seem to best conform to the model of civil society-led

Notes

- 1 Cornwall and Coelho (2004), Houtzager *et al.* (2008), Robinson (2007).
- 2 The author joined the LogoLink project as part of the IDS partner team and has since taken an active part in the discussion of the cases and results.
- 3 The definitional debate around civil society within development has raged for a number of years. See for example Lewis (2002).
- 4 See in particular Jad (2007) on the NGOisation of women's organisations in Palestine; Bebbington *et al.* (2008), on more general depoliticisation around NGO action.
- 5 This is based on draft and other project proposals, discussions with LogoLink staff, project researchers, as well as discussion with John Gaventa at IDS, a long-term partner of the network.
- 6 Following Houtzager's (2005) discussion of the need for an 'institutional fit' between the organisations of the poor and governance institutions.
- 7 This includes through the production of a short film which graphically demonstrates the challenges public services were facing, as well as permitting insights into the doubts and

local action to promote good governance, the South African and the Ugandan cases, are the two in which disappointment with the all-important material outcomes was greatest. Given the primary connection of the LogoLink network is involvement in local governance reform, it is not surprising that the research focus was on instances where this environment have been strengthened politically, as well as through changing citizen-state relations, whether formally or informally. The *IDS Bulletin* contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of the political bargains that shape these hybrid forms of public action, as well as of the nature of the impacts that these achieve.

- debates of many who later became among the 'co-governors' through participation in project committees.
- 8 This sense that improved trust and communication between frontline service-providers and citizens or communities can promote improved service delivery relates to the broader point around the ethos of public service delivery, and 'soft' incentives for bureaucratic performance. See, for example, Davis (2004) on reforms of the ethos of service delivery in the water sector in South Asia; Tandler and Freedheim (1994) for a classic account of how 'soft' incentives shape bureaucratic performance.
- 9 As the Department for International Development (DFID) framework for political analysis termed key actors behind pro-poor reforms.
- 10 During the research workshop in Bellagio, Ming Zhuang disagreed with the description of the Network for Migrant Workers as a 'success'; he did not consider it so as he had been disappointed that more change had not been achieved to date, given the great urgency of migrant workers' service needs.

References

- Ackerman, John (2004) 'Co-Governance for Accountability: Beyond "Exit" and "Voice"', *World Development* 32.3: 447–63
- Bebbington, Anthony J.; Hickey, Samuel and Mitlin, Diana, J. (2008) 'Introduction: Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives', in Anthony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey and Diana J. Mitlin (eds) (2008) *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*, London: Zed Books
- Chandhoke, Neera (2007) 'Civil Society', *Development in Practice* 17.4: 607–14
- Chatterjee, Partha (2004) *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Corbridge, Stuart; Williams, Glyn; Srivastava, Manoj and Véron, René (2005) *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V.S. (2006) 'Spaces for Change? The Politics of Participation in New Democratic Arenas', in A. Cornwall and V.S. Coelho (eds), *Spaces for Change?: The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, London: Zed Books
- Cornwall, Andrea and Coelho, Vera Schattan (eds) (2004) 'New Democratic Spaces', *IDS Bulletin* 35.2: 1–10
- Cornwall, Andrea and Gaventa, John (2001) *From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy*, IDS Working Paper 127, Brighton: IDS
- Davis, Jennifer (2004) 'Corruption in Public Service Delivery: Experience from South Asia's Water and Sanitation Sector', *World Development* 32.1: 53–71
- Goetz, Anne Marie and Gaventa, John (2001) *Bringing Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery*, IDS Working Paper 138, Brighton: IDS
- Goetz, Anne Marie and Jenkins, Robert (2005) *Reinventing Accountability: Making Democracy Work for Human Development*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Hickey, Sam and Mohan, Giles (2008) 'The Politics of Establishing Pro-poor Accountability: What can Poverty Reduction Strategies Achieve?', *Review of International Political Economy* 15.2: 234–58
- Hossain, Naomi (2009) *Rude Accountability in the Unreformed State: Informal Pressures on Frontline Bureaucrats in Bangladesh*, IDS Working Paper 319, Brighton: IDS
- Howell, Jude (2006) 'The Global War on Terror, Development and Civil Society', *Journal of International Development* 18: 121–35
- Howell, Jude; Ishkanian, Armine; Obadare, Ebenezer; Seckinelgin, Hakan and Glasius, Marlies (2008) 'The Backlash Against Civil Society in the Wake of the Long War on Terror', *Development in Practice* 18.1: 82–93
- Houtzager, Peter P. (2005) 'Introduction: From Policycentrism to the Policy', in Peter P. Houtzager and Mick Moore (eds), *Changing Paths: International Development and the New Politics of Inclusion*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Houtzager, Peter P.; Joshi, Anuradha and Lavallo, Adrián Gurza (eds) (2008) 'State Reform and Social Accountability: Brazil, India and Mexico', *IDS Bulletin* 38.6
- Jad, Islah (2007) 'NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements', *Development in Practice* 17.4: 622–9
- Jayal, Niraja G. (2008) 'New Directions in Theorising Social Accountability?', *IDS Bulletin* 38.6: 105–10
- Lavalle, Adrian G.; Acharya, Arnab and Houtzager, Peter P. (2005) 'Beyond Comparative Anecdotalism: Lessons on Civil Society and Participation from São Paulo, Brazil', *World Development* 33.6: 951–64
- Lewis, D. (2002) 'Civil Society in African Contexts. Reflections on the Usefulness of a Concept', *Development and Change* 33.4: 569–86
- Lewis, D. and Opoku-Mensah, P. (2006) 'Moving Forward Research Agendas on International NGOs: Theory, Agency and Context', *Journal of International Development* 18: 665–75
- O'Neill, Tammie; Foresti, Marti and Hudson, Alan (2007) *Evaluation of Citizens' Voice and Accountability: Review of the Literature and Donor Approaches*, London: Department for International Development (DFID)
- Robinson, Mark (ed.) (2007) 'Decentralising Service Delivery?', *IDS Bulletin* 38.1
- Tendler, Judith and Freedheim, Sara (1994) 'Trust in a Rent-Seeking World: Health and Government Transformed in Northeast Brazil', *World Development* 22.12: 1771–91
- Tsai, L. (2007) *Accountability Without Democracy: How Solidary Groups Provide Public Goods in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- World Bank (2003) *World Development Report 2003/4: Making Services Work for Poor People in Developing Countries*, Washington DC: World Bank