

64. Grass-roots pathways for challenging social and political inequality

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This contribution reports on a project to identify strategies for narrowing the inequality gap from below. Examples from India, Ethiopia, Brazil and Indonesia were selected to shed light on the dynamic between people's capacity to act in public and political spheres (their political or civic agency) and their ability to act in economic spheres (their economic agency). These studies illustrate the importance of linkages of mutual responsibility and accountability, as well as the capacity to claim rights and entitlements from the state. The authors discuss how these play out through individual and collective expression, and how skills in the economic sphere transfer to the civic or political, and vice versa.

Introduction

In the past few years, public attention has been drawn to escalating inequalities in the distribution of wealth within and between countries. Proponents of alternative economic futures have proposed a number of policy changes to redirect economies towards social justice and sustainability, citing the threats to democracy, social stability and environmental sustainability of the inequalities we see today.

Less well known are actions taken at the grass-roots level that push for political, economic and social inclusion, and evolve into precursors of a new economy. This contribution reports on a project to fill this gap through a series of scoping studies from India, Ethiopia, Brazil and Indonesia which were selected to shed light on the dynamic between people's capacity to act in public and political spheres (their political or civic agency) and their ability to act in economic spheres (economic agency).¹ Through these examples, we can see how people achieve the inclusion and agency in political and economic life that make the narrowing of the inequality gap possible (see the box overleaf).

The relevance of these cases to deliberations on how to address inequality has several dimensions.

They move the discussion of inequality beyond the economic, and draw attention to the inequalities of voice and participation in private and public decision-making which correlate with economic inequality. They move beyond issues of inclusion in economies shaped by the external forces of globalization, and into debates about how to shape and control democratized economies that are socially just and environmentally sustainable. As a result, they also call into question what is being measured as wealth, by assigning value to stocks and flows of environmental resources, local knowledge and social capital; to the sense of control associated with being a producer; and to livelihood, well-being and physical security. These cases show that intersecting forms of inequality are challenged not by segregating the economic from the political and social, an approach often favoured by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies, but by treating them as intertwined, just as they are in real life.

These cases are striking examples of pathways for transforming inequality. We point to ways in which marginalized women have organized to get a toe-hold on economic security in India, Indonesia and Ethiopia – all places of significant economic growth and growing inequalities, but with varying degrees of political openness.

Cases of grass-roots initiatives for a fairer economy from the global South

Self-Reliant Action through Joint Action

(Srijan), India: Srijan works with lowest caste, below-poverty-line (BPL) women who organize in self-help groups. Through its work in Rajasthan, women have become milk producers and shareholders in a dairy producer company with a stronger ability to advocate for basic services from the state.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA),

India: a member-based organization, SEWA is both a trade union and a development organization of self-employed women in the informal economy. SEWA is able to marshal its members to exert political pressure as well as supporting local women to achieve 'economic freedom'. In the agriculture sector, SEWA members resist urban expansion and corporate land purchase while at the same time strengthening economic agency, by linking producers and consumers in a sustainable land-based local economy.

PEKKA, Indonesia: a member-based NGO working with female heads of households facing stigma as divorced, widowed or abandoned women.

Supporting their economic empowerment through cooperatives, and their full participation as community leaders with paralegal training, PEKKA addresses cultural barriers to inclusion in decision-making in public as well as private domains.

WISE, Ethiopia: an organization dedicated to supporting women's economic and social empowerment, primarily through savings and credit and entrepreneurship support.

Banco Palmas, Brazil: the neighbourhood of Conjunto Palmeiras on the outskirts of Fortaleza has a fifty-year history of citizens organizing to claim rights to basic infrastructure, and then to build a local solidarity economy. A local social currency, 'palmas', is issued through the neighbourhood's community bank, Banco Palmas. This community banking model has since been replicated in over 100 Brazilian communities.

They vary in the degree to which public and political space is wide enough for marginalized populations to participate, and therefore in the degree to which skills acquired for economic agency transfer into the political realm.

We also look at the neighbourhood of Conjunto Palmeiras in Brazil and its fifty-year history of community organizing. This involves both political action to claim the rights to basic infrastructure, and economic action to create and sustain a viable local economy. It now faces new challenges to active participation, including urban violence. Finally we offer some closing reflections on the significance of these cases.

Pathways towards inclusion from the grass roots

The initiatives in India, Indonesia and Ethiopia have a similar focus: encouraging women to organize in groups to save, borrow and invest in micro-enterprises, to gradually achieve a sustainable livelihood and status in community life, and to use their collective strength for mutual solidarity.

The starting point is to reach out to vulnerable women in both the urban informal economy, and the agricultural sector. In the Indonesian case, the NGO PEKKA has a specific focus within this vulnerable category: women heads of households, often widowed or divorced, or left behind by the migration of male family members.

Such groups enable women to build and diversify income streams in an otherwise precarious household situation. Equally important is their function as a platform for NGOs and government agencies to build capacity and solidarity, and raise awareness about social and political rights and new economic opportunities. In Rajasthan, India, Srijan works with women's self-help groups among low-caste women. From these small beginnings, value chains for organized women to sell, process and market milk, and maximize returns at source, are being realized through a dairy producer company in which women hold shares. As a hybrid between a cooperative and a private company, the producer company complements the blend of collective and individual initiative nurtured in the self-help groups.

This in turn translates into collective claims for the services to which they are entitled, such as better schools, and on which their income-earning potential depends, such as veterinary services. As with SEWA, the ability of women to make demands on the state, or hold officials to account, is essential in a context where India's claims to democracy are confounded by high levels of corruption in its public distribution system.

In Indonesia, where space has been opened up through democratic reforms and decentralized governance, the female heads of households in PEKKA's programmes emerge as economic producers in community-based cooperatives and also as community leaders with paralegal training. Equipped with a progressive interpretation of Islamic teachings, these leaders have been able to support women through the village court system especially in marriage cases, and assert legal status for families headed by women. They also assist in birth registration, fundamental to claiming entitlements for women and children alike.

In Ethiopia, the women who get involved in WISE experience a social and economic boost through group-based savings and credit activities. They also make political gains in existing spaces for participation. They begin to be recognized, and are invited to participate in the deliberations of the local administration or in local community associations providing informal social safety nets. Nevertheless, the economic gains made by these women are still far from matched by their participation in other spaces, for example where market governance issues are negotiated, or by their influence in traditional associations. Economic agency seems to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for equivalent levels of capacity to influence decisions in the public sphere.

There is no simple linear trajectory for such grass-roots citizen-led initiatives, and the characteristics of each of these are unique. Consider for example, the role of SEWA, which has grown in its forty-four-year history to 1.9 million women members across twelve Indian states. As a trade union it strives to achieve 'voice, visibility and validation' for women workers, and has the legitimacy to champion their rights and entitlements and to press for legislative changes that acknowledge women's contribution to the economy as a whole. Recent examples of its achievements have been the legalization of street vending in 2014, and its role in preventing an amendment to the Land Acquisitions Bill which would have made acquisition of land for urban expansion or corporate agriculture possible without the permission of rural owners.

As a member-based organization, SEWA's leadership works closely with members at the local level to support their economic empowerment. At the same time, recognizing the political nature of economic freedom, SEWA membership is a mobilizing force to be reckoned with when issues of common concern need to be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge the roots of SEWA's approach in Gandhi's idea of economic freedom as economic self-reliance and full employment. Applying this insight to rural areas, SEWA has embarked upon a strategy of linking producers to consumers, starting a private company that purchases from SEWA producers, employs SEWA members and sells packaged and processed commodities through individual retailers in the villages, who are also SEWA members. Such deliberate strengthening of the local economy goes hand in hand with support to agricultural producers, so they can adopt technical innovations, adapt to the unpredictable consequences of climate change, and protect their land from acquisition. SEWA now advocates a minimum support income, partly so that producers can invest time in protecting and regenerating the quality of the land they work on, and partly as a strategy to ensure basic economic security, so that full participation in political and public life can be realized.

Transforming inequality from below

Many of the cases we have explored show promise as pathways to inclusion in economic and political spaces, to a more equitable distribution of public goods, or to the consideration of our responsibility to future generations in our use and valuing of environmental resources. They share too the conviction that economic transformation is intrinsic to narrowing the gap between rich and poor. The SEWA case is an example, while in north-east Brazil the case of Conjunto Palmeiras and Banco Palmas illustrates the phases of a similar transformative strategy. When coastal people were relocated to wasteland on the periphery of Fortaleza, they first agitated to secure basic infrastructure for a liveable neighbourhood, then proceeded to build a local economy, and eventually established a solidarity economy of 'prosumers' with its own local currency. The demonstration effect of this action has helped create similar initiatives throughout north-east Brazil, with local currencies being replicated in community banks across the region.

Such grass-roots initiatives start small and take decades, even generations, to come to fruition. Not all succeed, and in success they face new challenges, but they set a precedent in their own context, showing the way forward for a restructuring of economic and political life.

Conclusion

These cases provide insights into the potential and the limits of collective political and economic agency for addressing inequality. They speak to the balance between maintaining associational linkages locally and establishing effective relationships with state actors. Each dimension – horizontal or vertical – demands relationships of responsibility and accountability. In the face of fragile livelihoods, collective action, mutual responsibility, and alliance-building to strengthen local economic relationships are as critical for security as shaping local decision-making and holding institutions to account. How such collective economic and political agency is sequenced and sustained, and how individual economic gain affects the propensity towards collective action, are questions to pursue further. If ‘thin’ one-dimensional solutions to global poverty and inequality need to be replaced by thicker strategies (Edwards, 2011), these cases, still unfolding, are context-specific examples of how that is being done.

Notes

1. See Coady International Institute (2014) for preliminary work. A final synthesis paper is due in 2016. This research was carried out in a series of scoping studies. For each study the four to five-person team was composed of academics and NGO practitioners, including a representative of the local host organization, and was also mixed in terms of country of origin and disciplinary background. The opportunity for South-to-South peer learning was considered to be a priority.

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