

Local governance and community action

How poor and marginalized people can achieve change

Most people experience the impacts of governance, fair or unfair, at a very local level. It is where poor and marginalized people, including women, experience inequalities most keenly – in the way that issues that particularly concern them tend to get de-prioritized and their participation is obstructed. Local governance is also where, in theory, citizens can participate and take action to make changes that affect their lives, livelihoods and communities. In practice, the dynamics of local governance can be complex and challenging to navigate. This paper draws out the lessons from the case studies in the ‘Local Governance and Community Action’ series on the experience of communities in Nepal, Malawi, Kenya, Viet Nam and Tanzania. Discussed through the lens of Oxfam’s Right to Be Heard framework, the case studies explore a range of contexts in which local governance dynamics are central to processes of change.

Introduction

If poverty and marginalization are to be reduced, governance needs to be improved in fundamental, meaningful and inclusive ways. Governance is about the formal or informal rules, systems and structures under which human societies are organized, and how they are (or are not) implemented. It affects all aspects of human society – politics, economics and business, culture, social interaction, religion, and security – at all levels, from the most global to the very local.

This series of Programme Insights case studies, looking at examples from Nepal, Malawi, Kenya, Viet Nam and Tanzania,¹ focuses on governance at local level (village, neighbourhood, community). Most people experience the most immediate impacts, fair or unfair, of governance at a very local level. It is where women experience gender inequalities most keenly, for example in the way that issues that particularly concern them tend to get de-prioritized and their participation is obstructed. In most political systems, it is also where ordinary people should, in theory, be best placed to participate in governance, for example by voting for their local councillors, taking part in local committees or protesting against laws or actions that they don't think are fair.

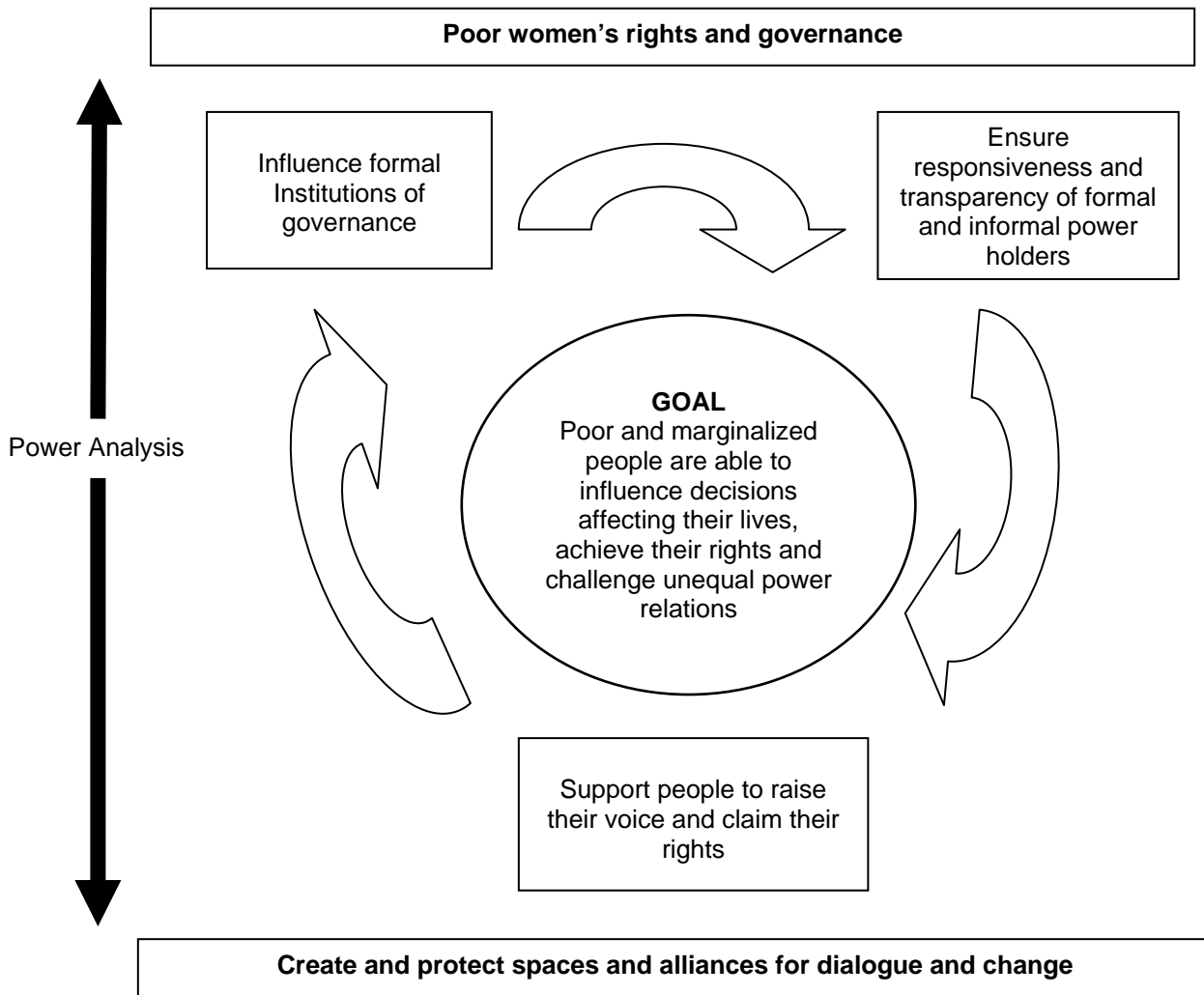
Potentially, local governance is where citizens can make very tangible differences to what happens around them. The case studies in this series explore a range of experiences in different countries and contexts where local governance dynamics are central to the processes of change. They also explore what it means to work on local governance in development programmes, and how governance affects men and women in different ways.

In practice, the dynamics of local governance can be complex and challenging to navigate. Local people may face barriers of language, ethnicity, gender, class, poverty, access to information, or simply lack the confidence to speak out. They face the visible formal and informal structures of power, such as village or neighbourhood committees, service user groups, tribal councils, dominant families or castes, and formal structures of local government. They also face power dynamics such as business interests or patronage relationships based on debt and obligation. These all contribute to a complex web of inter-relationships that affect how the formal structures and processes function in practice.

The importance of local context and conditions is a consistent theme across the stories in the individual case studies. It is essential for anyone working on governance to make a thorough analysis of local power relations, drawing on history and culture, specific economic realities, and the interests of different groups of people. This analysis can then shape the options and approaches that a development programme uses in a particular place and on a particular issue, informed by how change has happened in the past and might happen in the future. Specifically, anyone working on these issues needs a good sense of the obstacles that poor and marginalized people face if they are to be able to participate actively and effectively in local governance.

Oxfam's approach

In Oxfam's work on the Right to be Heard, we draw on a framework for thinking about governance which makes us differentiate between three key aspects: people claiming rights, institutions willing and capable of delivering rights, and people in positions of power with the will to make it happen. This helps us when thinking about governance in relation to achieving empowerment and rights for poor and marginalized people.



Source: Oxfam GB's Right to Be Heard framework, see www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice

This framework provides different entry points which we can interpret according to local circumstances and which point to particular kinds of interventions. It is important to look at the relationships between the three aspects of poor people raising their voice and claiming rights, institutional effectiveness, and the responsiveness of power-holders. When you deliberately address the relationships and processes, i.e. the arrows in the diagram, interesting things happen to the way issues are tackled in practice. For example, in the Kenya case study, we hear about very high levels of mistrust between local community members, local councillors and local authority officials. Although there were institutional structures of decentralization for local decision making, neither community members nor local authority officers knew enough about them to successfully implement them. The tools of social auditing² provided a mechanism to address the knowledge gaps, furnish a useful process and rebuild damaged relationships.

Even from the small number of case studies in this series, it is evident that there is no one simple approach to achieving local governance that addresses poverty and marginalization. What is clear, however, is that a range of approaches is more likely to deliver impact. The story from Tanzania is perhaps most explicit in illustrating a deliberately varied range of entry points and methods that can build synergy. It also shows how the complexity of governance and power relations can benefit from an evolutionary approach to trying things and building on what works.

All the case studies show how it is essential to work with both citizens and people in authority in order to achieve positive change in local governance. This might be about finding or creating spaces for constructive engagement

between people and authorities, as in the ward meetings organized by women in Nepal. It could involve working with citizens to raise awareness and knowledge about their rights and about how local governance works, so that they can make relevant demands and monitor effectively how resources are used and accounted for, as in Malawi and Kenya. It may require working with officials and elected representatives to increase understanding about how to work accountably and transparently and to understand the benefits of actively involving citizens in planning and monitoring, as in the Tanzania example. Or it might be about working with officials to understand how particular legislation or regulation should work, as in Kenya.

Think about conflict and power relations

Constructive collaboration may be the ideal, but is not always achievable. Local governance is about politics, whether party-political or informal. Conflict is an inherent component of this, since local governance is largely about the allocation of resources across different populations and areas of activity and choices always have to be made about priorities. Effective programme design for improving local governance will always need to rest on high quality analysis of local power relations. The case studies show that sometimes negotiation and dialogue will be possible, but sometimes strategies will need to focus on building citizens' power to challenge and confront abuses of power. Power can take many different forms, like 'power with' (organising collectively), 'power to' (skills and knowledge) and 'power within' (self esteem, confidence, sense of entitlement). It is important to look at how to build power in locally appropriate ways.

Local governance is located within the bigger picture of national governance. Where power and resources have been effectively decentralized, a focus on local governance can yield impressive results. The Kenya case study perhaps comes closest in this respect in the way local people were supported to hold the local governance structures to account. In contrast, where government is highly centralized, such as in Tanzania and Viet Nam, progress is greatly affected by the nature of the national system and the underlying intentions of national government.

All the case studies include elements of deliberate connection of local initiatives to national processes. This takes different forms. Where constructive legislation or policy exists nationally, links between local and national organizations can support local implementation. Local problems often need national solutions, as seen in the Malawi campaign for access to medicines.

Focus on tangible changes

A recurring theme across the individual stories is the importance of focusing action about local governance on the real, tangible interests of local people. Generally, these often involve health, education, livelihoods, water and sanitation. Women in Nepal moved into participation and leadership in committees and user groups on these issues; in Tanzania, communities became organized around setting up new market spaces for local women to sell produce, or around land rights. In other words, local governance activism needs to be focused around participation and leadership towards specific changes, rather than around abstract or generic participation and leadership. This not only ensures high motivation but also means that skills and capacities developed this way can be transferred to other issues as required.

Addressing marginalization on grounds of gender, ethnicity and age is often possible through local governance. In Nepal, participation in community discussion classes for women was a very effective way for women to develop confidence and learn about 'how things work' in a way that promoted active citizenship and supported them to take up leadership positions that directly

challenged the cultural norms. In Viet Nam, work with a particular ethnic group, using the local language, led to a considerable opening of space for community involvement in monitoring and planning at the local level.

Work with local dynamics

Local processes involve real people, who often know each other and live alongside each other. At local level, elected representatives and officials are often also community members. This can blur boundaries so that notions of the 'demand' (e.g. people insisting on effective service delivery) and 'supply' (e.g. institutional and political ability to deliver services) sides of governance become less clear-cut. They will have a history of various familial, social, religious and business relationships within the community and will be embedded in local power relations of gender, class, age, caste, ethnicity and tribe, with all the emotions and 'messiness' that entails. Any initiatives will inevitably involve many emotions including fear, hope, jealousy, envy, pride, self-interest, shame... (to name just a few). Some of this comes through in the case studies. In Nepal and Tanzania, for example, fear is an issue: the fear that has to be confronted in order to speak out and be active; the fear that is encountered when action triggers repression and defensiveness, or, implicitly, the fear of losing privilege and power. In Ngorongoro, Tanzania, communities and local councillors are now acting together to withstand pressures from higher levels of governance, having overcome previous relations of opposition and mistrust at the local level.

Calculate and manage approach to risk

Anyone working on local governance needs to be aware that in many contexts where there is not a culture of speaking out, individuals may be putting themselves at risk if they confront authority. It is vital to ensure first that individuals who want to take that risk are supported both from inside and outside the community, and that ideally the demands come from a group that has built the strength, skills and confidence to demand the changes they want to see. In Nepal, women did take a number of risks – facing opposition from husbands, and senior community members – but the support they received allowed them to prove themselves and to join with others in becoming change-makers within their villages.

Assess power relations between people

For governance to reduce poverty and marginalization, we have seen that it requires:

- changes among people claiming rights,
- institutions capable to deliver rights, and
- people in positions of power with the will to make it happen (see diagram above).

For organizations used to focusing largely on the civil society angle, it is a challenge to understand better how these different parties interact and to find ways of addressing the less familiar and perhaps less 'comfortable' work of engaging with institutions and people in positions of power. Community-based and non-government organizations, may need to learn how to work in highly politicized contexts and remain non-partisan, focusing on the issues. It means engaging with people who perhaps hold very different priorities, and engaging with the holders of informal power as well as official power structures. The analysis underpinning programming on local governance requires knowledge of the local institutions and actors and an understanding of what motivates different people in their various roles, their various allegiances, their strengths, weaknesses and specific challenges. If that element is missing it will be hard to identify effective constructive approaches

that avoid triggering responses of defensiveness and self-protection where attempts to achieve change are perceived as 'opposition'.

It is clear, both from these case studies and from plenty of other Oxfam experience, that accountability and transparency are proving useful entry points for engaging the various actors and processes to help navigate the various minefields of power relations in practice. It is also clear that people who take on official responsibilities do not necessarily have the competency to carry out those roles. Therefore, well-targeted support and training for office-holders can go a long way in building better governance relationships.

Engage with institutions capable of delivering rights

The institutional aspect is crucial. As the Malawi and Kenya examples show, there is often a gap to be bridged between policy and practice, and there is a role for citizen action in pressurizing for effective implementation of policy. Sometimes even established and perhaps large institutions lack capacities. Bi-lateral aid has played a significant role here in supporting particular institutions such as policing and justice systems. There can be a role here for non-state actors at local or national level in building capacity and helping to clarify roles and expectations. More often, though, the institutional angle needs to be addressed through various approaches to influencing and advocacy, sometimes including mass campaigning, as in the medicines campaign in Malawi.

At the local level, institutions can be clearly defined (such as in a local office of a national body) but can also be quite unclear. Sometimes the institutions of customary law may be represented by individuals with more than one role in a community and who are, themselves, embedded in the local web of community relations. There are also overlaps between governance structures, processes and business interests (not always in the open and not always legal), to add a further layer of complexity.

Any change in institutions has to involve work with individual people. In Nepal, this meant finding ways for individual women to engage with institutions from the inside, as committee members and leaders. If someone in a position of power is receptive to this kind of engagement, then strategies for influencing from inside can be very effective, as with the health post chief in Dailekh, Nepal.

There are many countries where formal structures of governance are based on the foundations of long-standing structures of kinship and tribe. This often coexists with political systems based on patronage, with complex relations of favour and indebtedness. Local governance under such systems needs to be navigated with that full complexity in mind. Local people understand how these systems operate and interact in ways that outsiders tend not to.

Issues and challenges

Culture change

Making change in local governance often requires culture change as much as a change in structures, processes and representation. Attitudes to authority of any kind may be deferential, and this is compounded by sets of norms and assumptions about who has the potential capacity to actively participate and who does not. So approaches to encouraging particular kinds of change need to address these cultural and psychological barriers – often through processes and ways of working as well as the more obvious and structured elements.

Poverty and marginalization affect women disproportionately, so deliberate attention to how this plays out in local governance, with appropriate action, is

essential. Gender issues are always present in local governance, in all three aspects of the framework as outlined earlier. There is a role for men as well as women in pressing for women's rights. There need to be institutions that are capable of delivering rights to women as well as men, even if that requires different mechanisms for delivery. And it requires both men and women in positions of power with the will to make women's rights a reality. The case studies here are full of examples of women in communities building confidence and capacity to engage and men learning to value the contributions that women make, as participants and leaders and decision makers. Women in decision making structures may need to learn 'how things work' and build a network of social and political relationships in order to be more effective.

Spaces for engagement

Spaces for engagement between the various actors are essential and often need to be created. A national or international non-government organization can find itself well placed to get this to happen at a national level, often by identifying the people to invite in and initiating some kind of discussion or interaction in a neutral way. But at local level, it will need someone who is seen as locally legitimate to initiate these kinds of spaces. The Kenya case shows that you do not necessarily need to get all the relevant parties into the same space at the same time. However, local knowledge and political acuity is needed to make good judgements about what will work in the context. Spaces are also needed for reflection and learning as things progress.

Access to information

Information is key. As Maimuna says in the Tanzania case, 'Ignorance is a killing machine'. All the case studies show how making information available and accessible to people – in communities and in positions of power and institutions – is an important element of local governance work. Accessibility, in this instance, is more than 'physical' access: any issue also needs to be accessible in terms of people's ability to take it on board and act on it.

Things can take time

The kinds of changes covered in the case studies take time. Some changes can happen quickly, but the changes in culture and in deeper attitudes required to ensure that system and process changes stick can take much longer. It is probably helpful, even with shorter time-bound interventions, to think in the context of 10, 20 or 30 year change trajectories, and as far as possible to have commitment for the long term. Timing in relation to existing processes is also important. In the Tanzania example, engagement well in advance of an election process was clearly more productive than more last-minute engagement.

Risk management

Local and national governance are both about political processes, and carry significant levels of risk. This risk can include violence, fear, crack-downs on individuals or groups, a closing of space to operate for particular actors and so on. The risk is not just to citizens as they get organized and active, it is also to individuals within governance structures. It can be risk to life and limb, to well-being and livelihood, to reputation or command of power. People in powerful positions may feel threatened. Some of this may involve hidden power connected to business interests, which, because it is hidden, is a challenge to factor into any risk analysis. Some people are very willing to take risks, others are not. Any intervention should be aware of any potential risks and to calculate, manage and mitigate as far as possible, although of course some risks cannot be foreseen.

By definition, the more people are marginalized, the more they need very specific approaches in order to overcome the dynamics that exclude them. This may be the need to work in a particular language, as in Viet Nam, or the very detailed attention to confidence and awareness raising seen in Nepal, or providing access for people with disabilities who are often left out (and don't appear in these case studies). The challenge is to find ways to work with the level of specificity and attention to detail that will enable an intervention to be effective. But active citizenship will not be the answer for all. Many people in the poorest 10 per cent of the population are unlikely to be in a position to be active in their own interests. They will need others to act on their behalf.

Monitoring and evaluation as part of governance

All of these issues have implications for how monitoring and evaluation are carried out. Monitoring is often used to test compliance with plans and therefore as a management tool. But done well, monitoring becomes an essential part of ensuring that work on local governance remains relevant, timely, attuned to the context and especially the changing environment and the shifting sands of local power relations. Good monitoring will enable the work to be adapted as required. In an evolutionary approach, as seen in the Tanzania case, monitoring, linked with reflection and learning, is essential to the success of the approach. Monitoring also requires disciplined record-keeping of processes (the minute detail as well as the bigger picture, and using a variety of media and testimonies) and results that will make monitoring and learning more productive and will help communicate what has happened to others.

Conclusion

These case studies have covered a lot of ground. But there are some absences, and some unresolved issues. One missing topic is any description or discussion of the role that systems of patronage play in shaping local governance. There is an increasing understanding of the need to address this issue in governance work,³ but we do not yet have good examples of how development practice can take this on board at local level. Neither do we have much information about how protection issues, such as ensuring vulnerable people can access their rights during conflict or humanitarian emergency, can be addressed through local governance.

Another issue which is widespread but which is only deliberately addressed in the Nepal case study, is corruption. It is present as an issue in the other cases, but finding ways to proactively address it is as challenging as identifying who is driving corruption and how.

Decentralization is not the panacea it is often held up to be. In Kenya we see that to make it work takes a lot of active effort on the part of many people. Done badly, it can provide yet more opportunities for getting money or advantage through the dishonest use of political power and influence and other kinds of corruption, which have immediate negative impacts on local people.

We have passed the point where over half of the world's population is now urban, yet none of these case studies address local governance in urban contexts. Urban local governance takes very different forms from rural, being located in very fast-moving politicized environments with large numbers of actors and interests to consider. There is much to be learned about how to operate effectively in the interests of poor and marginalized people in urban environments.

The challenge of how to increase the effectiveness of local governance and its ability to deliver pro-poor change is one which will continue to be relevant.

This is not only because of the slow pace at which some change happens, but also because so many forces are pulling in the opposite direction, needing ongoing counterbalance. This is an area where naivety has no place: the potential risks are very real ones, and local governance is a site of conflict as well as potential collaboration. It is not an area of technical problems with technical fixes. Risk management and appropriate protective measures need to be part of normal practice in local governance.

Local governance is a subject where the micro matters. Tiny differences in approach, attitude or method can make the difference between success and failure. Learning from what doesn't work and from outright failure needs to be embedded as a continual feature and ambition needs to be realistic, especially as it relates to active participation.

There are many ways to work to improve local governance. Combining the three aspects, of people claiming rights, institutions capable to deliver rights, and people in positions of power with the will to make it happen in ways appropriate to the context, will provide considerable opportunities and entry points. We plan to add further case studies to this series, and welcome contributions. It is worth noticing that as well as being informed by good analysis, these will also be informed by serendipity – watching for the chance combinations of the right person/people, the right moment, the right focus, the right alignment with other events – requiring good judgement and probably inevitably, whatever the expectation about how change will happen, a certain amount of sheer luck.

Notes

¹ This is the initial set; further case studies will be added to the series in due course.

² Social auditing and social accountability are terms used to refer to a range of mechanisms such as budget monitoring/tracking, community score cards, etc. See <http://internationalbudget.org/library>

³ See, for example, Sue Unsworth (2010) 'An Upside down view of Governance', Institute of development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.

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