

Civic-Driven Change: Facing Risk

Shirin M. Rai (Director, Leverhulme Trust Programme on Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament University of Warwick, Coventry, UK)

This brief explores assessing risk in organizing civic-driven action. The exercise of citizens' agency needs to be informed by a mapping of power/relations – class, caste, gender, space – amongst others. In addition, adequate support is called for to translate processes that increase people's critical awareness into practical action without making those who take risks to change society more vulnerable in the process.

Security and Agency

'Human security is concerned with safeguarding and expanding people's basic freedoms. It requires both shielding people from acute threats and empowering people to take charge of their own lives. Needed are integrated policies that focus on people's survival, livelihood and dignity, during downturns as well as in prosperity.'

Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, *Human Security Now*, 2003.

In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen suggests that agency is people being able to exercise freedom to make choices in their lives as opposed to being constrained by natural, physical or social structures. This freedom, however, is not devoid of tension. In the words of Hannah Arendt, there is tension 'between our consciousness and conscience, telling us that we are free and hence responsible, and our everyday experience in the outer world, in which we orient ourselves according to the principle of causality'.¹ Risk is therefore built into the exercise of agency and needs to be assessed, minimized and addressed in order to expand the sphere of freedom in which it is exercised.

Clarity about the Nature of Change

Risks are different when the change agendas pursued are reformist rather than 'revolutionary'. This distinction brings our attention to the concept of change itself. When working for change in a social environment, what is it that we are imagining? There are many types of change and processes involved, some more risky than others.

Change is often used interchangeably with different concepts. Examples are metamorphosis, which emphasizes a (biological) process of a conspicuous and relatively abrupt change in form or structure. There is change as growth and differentiation. Adaptation focuses on evolutionary or reformist change where individuals, groups and societies adapt to alteration in conditions in order to maximize their chances of survival. There is change as 'rupture', which involves disruption or a break with the past and can be therefore revolutionary. Change is seen as a random series of events culminating in transformation of existing social relations, lacking determinism or pre-design. Change is also described as being cyclical, in the course of which circumstances are expected to recur. Finally, change can be incremental as well as inadvertent.

Actors involved in bringing about change in society might be thinking of very different types of change, with different expecta-

tions and different ways to bring it about. If not fully and openly discussed, differences in the what, why, who and how of change can have disastrous consequences described in the box below.

Women's Development Programme (WDP), Rajasthan, India

A valuable, but flawed, state-initiated and I/NGO-supported WDP sought to bring about social change in gender relations through the work of women volunteer workers, called *sathins* (friends). In 1992, tensions in this initiative came to a head with the gruesome gang rape of one *sathin*, Bhanwari Devi. She had dared to take the programme's goals seriously and challenged domestic violence in upper-caste/class homes. In male retaliation, she was paraded naked through the streets of the village. Her husband was also beaten up for not being able to 'keep his wife under control'. The men involved in the rape and violence were acquitted by the Magistrates' Court on the grounds that an upper caste man would not disregard caste differences to rape a low caste woman. Recently, the WDP has been bureaucratized as well as starved of funds.

Power-Mapping

The concept of power mapping could be useful for civic-driven change. What do we mean by power-mapping? It could mean: 'learning how to look carefully at interests and the resources around your problem or issue, (...) developing strategies and taking action'.² This would involve mapping interests: Who is impacted by your problem or issue? Who are potential allies to work with to address your problem? It will also show up people who may create difficulties or be opposed to your approach. It would also involve analysing power: Who has power to influence the outcome of agency? Who makes the decisions and has resources to facilitate as well as impede change?³ This methodology can reassure as well as challenge those mapping power in the context of their movements of change. Mapping is an ongoing process, and if done well can lead to a deepening of understanding, realism and capacities to act.

What to Map?

- Interests. What are the interests of the proposed participants and those who may be indirectly affected?
- Power. What power do (non)participants have and what power is needed to accomplish intended goals?
- Rules. What protocols guide or govern engagement with various participants and among them? Can protocols be differen-

tiated from laws and how is this to be done? What rules of the game are in play? On whose terms and how have they been made?

A Mapping Caution

Power-mapping can be a helpful tool in alerting agents to the obstacles they might face and the support they might garner. However, power-mapping has its limits:

- Circulation of power takes unpredictable forms and therefore can escape mapping.
- Informality of power structures can pose similar challenges.
- An expectation gap, making informal power visible, can develop and lead to weakening of support.

Cementing Support

Building bridges across like-minded agencies and movements is an important way to cement support and mitigate risk. Individuals participating in social movements, NGOs, local and national media, could all be approached to thicken the safety net for movements of change. More essential than this precautionary principle, however, is 'political education' for the most vulnerable actors in order to enable them to recognize risk and work towards contingent, minimizing strategies.

When considering political education, the state has always occupied an ambivalent political space. On the one hand it is an institution that mediates to consolidate and stabilize social stability and privilege. On the other, it is an institution that can be lobbied and seen as an ally against some forms of dominant social relations. In a complex way, the 'risk borders' of civic agency and activism are related to the activist borders of states. Working out how a state will react to civic agency is therefore both highly contextual and complicated to get right.

The case of Prakriti in Nagpur suggests that the change-tolerant borders of state can be expanded by altering the composition of governance. The point is not to take the state as inherently unchangeable, but to be intelligent in taking action.

Prakriti, Nagpur

Funded by the Ford Foundation, this programme's objective is to enhance the participation of elected women representatives with an increased awareness of their powers and responsibilities. The result would enhance the articulation of gender issues by the women representatives, especially concerns relating to women's health, sanitation, education, and employment. It would also generate an increased capacity of representatives to influence decision-making as well as mobilizing financial resources for local development needs. To the extent that these objectives required education of the family, neighbourhood, community and administration, Prakriti geared up to face these challenges as well. It undertook to educate voters about the importance of electing women. The adopted showed how society and the economy could benefit from the participation of women who have long been efficient managers of the household. (Niraja Gopal-Jayal)

Moving Forward with Confidence

Insisting upon counting the costs of social change leads more readily to the recognition of structural barriers to empowerment. This 'counting' process can re-politicize agency as well as the empowerment that might accrue as a result of exercising it. This approach to risk assessment would then allow the focus of civic-driven strategies of change to expand beyond individuals to include wider contexts in which they and social groups function. To the extent that risk is inversely related to social and economic advantage, greater attention to risk redistribution in society will inherently highlight inequality and potentially offer new ways of dealing with it.

Recommendations

- *Establishing a change/risk typology.* For different types of change prepare a 'riskiness' scenario or risk-rating. Consider how, in each case, vulnerability is distributed across potential actors. Use this as a reference guide when considering asking for or negotiating support.
- *Mapping power.* Currently, the focus is on the exercise of agency, but not on risks of exercising it. Charting power in context would better expose the potential for citizen self-organization and the prospects or participation and sustainability of change over time.
- *Funding action as well as offsetting risks.* An insistence on measurable outcomes of action should not be seen as the only form of accountability - offsetting risks that enable citizens to act should also count as valued outcomes.
- *Risk Assessment.* Awareness of risk should be made part of the initial discussions about programmes, projects as well as initiatives. With acknowledgement of power differentials among them, citizens should be involved from the start. As a moral principle, the risks of agency carried by local actors should weigh more heavily than those of funders.
- *Support for risk awareness.* Often citizens' concerns for change make them overlook the risks involved in the choice of strategies to be employed. Political space and funding should be created for 'risk training'. This form of capability development could be politically sensitive as different social groups interact. This type of initiative opens up opportunities for alternative strategies of action to be discussed in the context of their 'risk factor' as well as their potential for change.
- *Supporters of change.* Risk can be managed better when there are supporters who can be organized to blow the whistle if citizens' rights are attacked or otherwise undermined. The media - local, national, written and visual, traditional and electronic - can all be engaged in order to minimize risk by making such occurrences public. As a precautionary measure, local groups, movements and NGOs should be identified and approached before the start of a risk-prone change.

¹ Hannah Arendt, 1993, *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, p. 143, Penguin Books.

² www.publicachievement.org/TeacherGuide/Activities/MindMapStarter.pdf

³ Harry C Boyte, 2008, *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference*, Minnesota Historical Society Press/Kettering Press.