

Citizenship narratives in the absence of good Governance: Voices of the Working Poor in Bangladesh

IDS working paper series 331
Naila kabeer & Ariful Haq Kabir

Summary

Remko Berkhout, Knowledge officer Civil Society Building – HIVOS
r.berkhout@hivos.nl

How does the interaction between the poor and civil society organizations effect perceptions of and possibilities for citizenship? Naila Kabeer and Afirul hoque interviewed 70 citizens from rural and urban Bangladesh, belonging to the so called 'working poor' class. Their voices are the backbone of a fascinating IDS working paper that offers plenty of food for thought.

The premise is that in the absence of good governance, the poor struggle to acquire citizenship, roughly defined as 'the capacity to question, aspire and organize in order to transcend communities of birth'. In many of the less developed nations, the poor are confined to the prevailing system of domination, hence their 'communities of birth' come to equal 'communities of fate' in which the (unjust) social order is reproduced and democratization is hampered. The main hypothesis of the paper is to explore the extent to which chosen forms of associations, or 'communities of choice' shape the capacity of the working poor to think and act like citizens.

Interviews in the urban setting paint a bleak picture. Jute mill workers and garment workers report shocking stories on the work of the trade unions that have mostly been co-opted, corrupted and captured by local elites. Self employed workers in the slums, interact primarily with 'minimalist' organizations, i.e. organizations that only offer financial services. Their narratives reveal that this interaction has done little to promote their awareness of rights. A decreasing minority of Urban NGOs runs empowerment programmes and these are received more positively. Yet, Kabeer and Hoque conclude that the capacity of the working poor to aspire or to organize is severely hampered by the pervasive systems of corruption and injustice that dominate urban life. The quest for citizenship rights in the urban context within the current political system is an almost impossible endeavor, with little to expect from civil society organizations in the short run.

Rural respondents paint a more positive picture. Kabeer and Hoque interview beneficiaries from village groups served by three different socially oriented NGOs primarily offering packages of microfinance coupled with training and empowerment programmes. The interviews confirm the hypothesis: Interaction with NGO programmes tends to enable beneficiaries to enhance their rights awareness and to deploy collective action to advocate for change. Rural narratives also reveal how collective action broadens space for dialogue, emerging rural leadership, constructive bargaining with local elites and access to formal political processes. Kabeer and Hoque dub this process as 'Communities of fate' becoming 'communities of practice', through the emergence of NGO nurtured communities of choice.

General conclusion? The narratives paint a picture of hope and despair. We learn first hand from the working poor how transformative NGO programmes can enhance citizenship rights and capacity for collective action, even in a setting of pervasive weak governance. Sadly, the study, referring to the majority of minimalist NGOs and mechanistic approaches, also confirms that this transformative potential of civil society organizations in Bangladesh is being eroded by the values of the market place.

The conclusion of the study is not surprising and likely carries some validity for similar contexts. However, the citizen's perspectives offer unique insights into the reality of poor peoples lives and the effects of NGO programmes on their struggle for justice. Their stories alone already make this paper a worthwhile read.