

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
Institute of Development Studies

IDS WORKING PAPER 359
FEBRUARY 2011

Mobilising the State?

Social Mobilisation and State Interaction in India, Brazil and South Africa

The ways in which citizen mobilisations and state actions interact are an underexplored area. This paper considers these so-called ‘modes of interaction’ to explore how democratic practices can reduce the gap between the formal equality granted citizens in representative democracies and the reality of extreme inequality in the global South.

This paper explores the pathways and mechanisms of interaction between the state and citizen by considering the historical and contemporary experiences of citizen mobilisation in three democratic middle-income countries: India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA). The intention is to identify the circumstances under which these states address, respond and deal with citizen action in order to better understand how states in the South can be more responsive to citizens’ demands, in particular those aimed at overcoming pronounced socio-economic inequalities. The authors consider how the struggle for rights can be critical in making democracy work for the poor and marginalised.

In this paper, which synthesises insights from the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability based at IDS, the authors adopt a political process approach and consider the interactions between state and society actors, through state action and

mobilisation, as independent variables capable of promoting democracy. The authors explore these modes of interaction in the IBSA countries which, despite different histories, democratic institutions and processes, and cultural and socio-economic settings, face similar challenges of managing the development of the poor while responding to the demands of neoliberal economic growth.

The authors consider the historical paths of social movements in each country. India and Brazil are found to have strong histories of mobilisation since democratising (albeit with Brazil having the far greater participatory spaces), with both state and mobilisations evolving through interactions. Mobilisation in the younger democracy of South Africa is weaker and less collaborative with the state. In all three countries mobilisation predominantly occurs around claims for recognition of the identities of the poor and marginalised, and resource distribution. However, the nature of

opportunities for citizen engagement differs across IBSA, as does the way social actors use these opportunities.

The authors discuss six case studies of mobilisation, two from each country. They find that resources and recognition issues often interlink, and mobilisation is often greater when pitched against existing policy deficiencies. They identify two main mechanisms of state-society interaction: where society organises and makes demands on the state, and where the state invites society to participate. The cases analysed show no direct relationship between mobilisation and state response, though states responded more positively when they perceived the framework and strategy of mobilisation as corresponding to their own. Forms of state-society interaction and engagement become more varied and sophisticated over time, but the democratic gains are not always clear.

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Key research findings

- In societies characterised by high levels of inequality such as the IBSA countries mobilisation strategies focus around interlinked claims of identities and resource distribution, resulting in dual approaches to state interaction.
- The level and face of the state with which a mobilisation interacts depends on whether demands are for the execution of existing policies or the creation of new ones.
- State responses to mobilisation depend on a complex set of criteria and cannot be second-guessed, but states tend to be most comfortable with collaborative and ideologically familiar approaches.
- However, the more a social mobilisation collaborates with the state, the more likely the end-result will be cooption.
- Democratic mobilisation becomes more sophisticated and varied over time, but successes are not linear.
- The agency created in the process of mobilisation and interaction with the state leads to a greater sense of empowerment – the ‘footprints’ of democracy.

The IBSA states demonstrate that the more established a democracy the more modes of state-society interaction there will be, particularly collaborative ones. However, this does not directly correspond to greater successes for legitimate citizen demands addressing great socio-economic

disparities. A state’s response to citizen mobilisation is selective, and resistance is likely when demands are raised through protest rather than collaborative mechanisms. As a consequence, building inclusive democracies in the global South through state-society relations, and meeting the demands of identity recognition and resource redistribution claims, is also selective. However, taking a citizen-centric perspective, such interactions keep the democracy debate alive.

Key policy lessons/implications for research

- Efforts to deepen democracy via civil society or the state on their own will fail.
- Inclusive democracies must be built through citizen mobilisation and engagement with the state.
- There is no clear relationship between the negotiating strategy of mobilisations and state response.
- Transformative policies for the poor and marginalised are more likely to emerge from mobilisations falling outside the state’s framework...
- ... although states are more likely to respond positively if they recognise demands as falling within a familiar framework.
- Citizen actions should be viewed as beneficial in keeping the democracy debate alive.

Credits

Ranjita Mohanty, Lisa Thompson and Vera Schattan Coelho (2011), *Mobilising the State? Social Mobilisation and State Interaction in India, Brazil and South Africa*, IDS Working Paper 359, Brighton: IDS

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