Participation, Power and Social Change
The aim of the Participation, Power and Social Change (PPSC) Team is to facilitate participatory, power-aware research for social change.

This year we have carried out cutting-edge work on emerging issues such as collective mobilisation in North Africa, new forms of ‘unruly politics’, and the social impacts of the global financial crisis. We concluded a ten-year Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, funded by the UK Department for International Development. We launched the Big Push Forward initiative – a coalition to create space for a greater variety of approaches to impact assessment. We have added a number of experienced action researchers to the Team, enhancing our capacity to support large-scale participatory research and communication processes.

Our work is now organised in four clusters:

- new approaches to co-constructing knowledge
- gender justice and sexuality
- power and politics
- social change and development in settings of violence and conflict.

BEING PRESENT WHERE IT COUNTS: EXHIBITION ON SEXUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

By convening a diverse range of theorists and activists to assess prevailing approaches to sexuality and explore new perspectives the Sexuality and Development Programme has created a cutting-edge portfolio of work. Communicating and influencing have been central to the approach. Through a mobile photographic exhibition, the programme vividly brought research to life for an academic and policy audience. The exhibition was launched at the Department for International Development, our funder, on Valentine’s Day 2011 and provided an opportunity to stress the linkages between development and intimacy, love, pleasure and romance. Images and text allowed us to explore: the links between sexuality, pleasure and wellbeing; the ways in which poverty constrains sexual expression and behaviour; how departing from sexual norms can make you poor and how conformity can also be damaging; and the links between sexuality and violence.
BEING PRESENT WHERE IT COUNTS: UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

In 2011 the popular uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world showed the power of citizen’s collective action to bring about change in constrained political environments. But pursuing a citizen-led approach to development has been hampered by a lack of evidence on the measurable outcomes one can expect from citizen action. Mariz Tadros (PPSC Fellow) has been working in this context for some time. Her recent study ‘Engaging Politically Behind Red Lines’ with Taghreed Abou Hamdan and Hind Mahmoud, examined six cases where women’s collective mobilisation led explicitly to policy change in Egypt and Jordan (between 2000 and 2010). They assessed what factors accounted for the emergence, success and failure of women’s coalitions, and concluded that engagement in informal politics was as – if not more – important than formal citizen–state engagement. This work has helped to lay the ground for a new PPSC Team focus on unruly politics – politics that emerge outside of the state, civil society and even organised social movements – which will help improve the evidence base and fuel policy debate on citizen-led development.

LINKING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES: THE CAPACITY COLLECTIVE

We are using action research to co-construct new practices that support sustainable capacity development for social change. Much contemporary capacity development work focuses on individual and organisational skill deficits, but our whole-system approach aims to drive practice forward by acknowledging the complexity of social change processes, the importance of learning in action, and the need to address inequitable power relations in supporting people’s capacity to act in transformative ways. With financial support from Irish Aid and other donors, we are co-facilitating action research processes in Peru, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Ghana and Uganda. Our strategy is based on the belief that the sharing of diverse experiences and perspectives is central to the co-construction of new knowledge and practice. In May 2010 we published an IDS Bulletin on ‘Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change’. In July 2010 we hosted a workshop in Nicaragua where participants from the action research initiatives reflected on the processes and capacities that have emerged.

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In South Africa the effect of working with the IDS Sexuality and Development Programme has permitted a fresher understanding of young people’s sexualities. Often, African sexualities have been framed within the logic of sexual danger and it is an area of work that continues to flourish. Under circumstances of continued sexual risk and HIV and AIDS, sexual danger remains dominant. However, when I spoke to young people in the various social contexts of South Africa, danger was just a part of their experience of sexuality. Boys and girls, aged 16–17, spoke in eloquent ways about their desires, pleasures and their aspirations. Most spoke about romantic relationships, of love, fun and pleasure. Working with young people means taking seriously their claims to love and finding ways of enhancing pleasure in spite of sexual danger.

RESEARCH CENTRES

Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability
Pathways of Women’s Empowerment