

Helpdesk Research Report: Social Movements and Poverty Reduction

09.12.09

Query: Please provide case studies, examples, and analytical work on how social movements have contributed to development/poverty reduction.

Enquirers: DFID

Contents

1. Overview
2. Analytical work
3. Case studies

1. Overview

There is limited research available on the role of social movements in development processes. It is widely acknowledged that establishing a causal relationship between social movements and any observed change in societies is problematic. In particular, attribution is difficult because there are usually multiple variables involved in any process of social change, including other actors and networks. The vast majority of the available case study material on social movements does not focus specifically on assessing their impact, but rather on describing their goals, tactics and experiences of engagement with the state.

Nevertheless, much of the literature on social movements supports the normative assumption that they can foster positive social change. Social movements are often viewed as important in terms of altering balances of power, promoting the empowerment of excluded groups, and improving access to basic resources for the poor. Movements rarely work directly on poverty, nor do they emerge simply because poverty exists, nevertheless they can challenge the prevailing power relations which often (re)produce poverty. Recent empirical work has further elaborated on the ways in which social movements can potentially influence on development. Bebbington (2008) identifies (from the available literature) several causal pathways through which social movements can impact on poverty. These are: Through challenges to the institutions that underlie the political economy of chronic poverty (challenging processes of exploitation or dispossession); through reworking the cultural politics of poverty (challenging ideologies surrounding poverty debates); through direct affects on the assets of the poor (providing access to land, water, shelter); and through engagements with the state.

Much of the available case study evidence on social movements is focused on Latin America, where there are multiple cases of indigenous people's movements, housing movements, environmental movements and peasant movements which are often regarded as having altered citizen-government relations on the continent (see Domike, 2007). In South Africa, there are high-profile examples of movements that emerged post-democratisation, including the successful Treatment Action Campaign (see Friedman, 2006).

Nevertheless, many case studies of social movements conclude their impact on long-term processes of development and institutional change remains limited. Some argue social

movements cannot shift fundamental processes of exploitation, particularly those related to processes surrounding capitalism (Mitlin, 2006). Many point out that the opportunities and constraints facing social movements are determined not only by their character and their strategies, but also by the environment in which they operate. Certain characteristics of movements (e.g. lack of coherence and tensions within them) are seen by some as weakening the potential for them to impact positively on development outcomes. Where social movements are perceived as a threat to structures of power, they often face repression by the state, hindering their progress (e.g. Combined Harare Residents Association, Kamete 2009). Some caution that social movements can have unintended consequences, such as spurring influential counter-movements, creating new forms of clientelism, and reinforcing symbolic boundaries separating the poor from the rest of society (e.g. the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) Reygadas 2009).

2. Analytical work

Bebbington, A., 2007, 'Social Movements and the Politicization of Chronic Poverty', *Development and Change* 38(5): 793–818

<http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/socialmovements/publications/papers/DevelopmentandChange2007BebbingtonPoliticizingPoverty.pdf>

This article argues that chronic poverty is a socio-political relationship rather than a condition of assetlessness. Social movements are therefore of acute importance, because they are vehicles through which these socio-political relationships are argued over in society and potentially changed. Movements rarely work directly on poverty, nor do they emerge simply because poverty exists, rather: 'they emerge to challenge existing social and political economic arrangements, one of whose effects is to produce and sustain poverty. Their terrain of action is therefore political: challenging ideas, assumptions, dominant practices and stereotypes [...] Perhaps the most important role of social movements in addressing chronic poverty is that of destabilizing dominant, taken-for-granted ideas about poverty and the reasons why it is so chronic.' (p. 813)

There has been a tendency to assume that the ways in which social movements will affect poverty pass through the state (e.g. by placing pressure on governments to adopt new poverty reduction policies etc). But much of the literature on social movements suggests their prime importance is rather to change the ways in which society understands poverty in the first place. Four pathways through which movements can affect poverty can be identified in the literature:

1. *Through challenges to the institutions that underlie the political economy of chronic poverty:* Many social movements have emerged to challenge processes of exploitation and dispossession. In Latin America, communities have mobilized around issues of trade liberalization (because of the perceived adverse effect on livelihoods). Other mobilizations have occurred around natural resource extraction – for example, Bolivia's 'water wars', and local mobilizations of communities affected by mining in Bolivia and Peru. Whilst chronic poverty *per se* does not lead to the emergence of these movements, they often emerge within environments characterized by chronic poverty. 'Typically these movements argue that such forms of extraction and resource governance do little to reduce poverty. Some argue that they actually deepen poverty through resource dispossession and the environmental and social damage visited on the resources of poor people living in the vicinity of these activities' (p. 10).

Other movements emerge as responses to social structures and institutions that serve to exclude groups from certain domains of political and economic life. This particularly includes identity-based, gender, place, ethnic and racial movements

which seek to challenge the 'terms of recognition' of disadvantaged groups. In Latin America, such movements have played an important role in creating new public spaces in which novel debates on development and democracy have occurred. For example, People's assemblies in Ecuador have helped change the terms of national and local debates on development, as well the terms on which indigenous groups are recognized.

2. *Through their roles in reworking the cultural politics of poverty:* One of the most important effects of social movements is to challenge ideologies surrounding poverty debates; by using knowledge to affect social processes, and challenging dominant ideas about the nature and acceptability of poverty. For example, in Ecuador, Bolivia and Guatemala, increased indigenous people's organizations have helped make the multiple links between ethnicity and poverty visible and debated in ways that were not the case twenty years ago. (pp. 806-807)
3. *Through direct effects on the assets of the poor:* Movements rarely emerge in order to have a direct impact on the assets of the poor, but they have been important in enhancing access to land, shelter and water. Mobilizations for land typically emerge in contexts of skewed land distributions and tied labour arrangements linked to these distributions. The Landless People's Movement in Brazil is a prominent example. MST has changed the meanings of land and landlessness in, and beyond, Brazil, and has benefited both the chronically poor and middle-sized farmers, as well as landless rural workers.
4. *Through their engagements with the state:* Movements are continually troubled by debates on whether and how to engage the state, often culminating in internal arguments and divisions. Relationships vary on a continuum, from collaboration to adversarial relationships, and the success of the strategies employed by movements will vary according to context. Conciliatory approaches have been effective for the Slum Dwellers movement in India, mining companies in Peru and Ecuador have arguable only really shifted their approaches to mineral development and community relations in response to direct action. Some commentators argue the act of negotiation with the state can make movements less responsive to grassroots demands and can demobilize them.

However, several factors can weaken social movements and therefore their potential to influence the dynamics of chronic poverty. These include problems of internal representation and democracy (including how far they can represent the poorest), the difficulty of sustaining coherence and convergence among actors, and tensions within movements.

See also:

Bebbington, A., 2009, 'Poverty Reduction and Social Movements: A Framework With Cases', paper prepared as a background paper for UNRISD's forthcoming Poverty Report, Institute for Development Policy and Management and Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester, UK

http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/socialmovements/publications/reports/Bebbington_Paperfinal_Unrisd_Poverty.pdf

This paper argues there are many causal pathways through which social movements can affect poverty, but that the relative significance of any particular pathway depends on the domain of contention in question, the type of social movement involved, and the more general political economy context. The general relevance of social movements to poverty reduction is clear; poverty is a product of prevailing relations of power, and social movements emerge to challenge or deepen these prevailing relations of power. But the roles of movements in poverty reduction will vary significantly depending on the political regime of the

moment – and that context defines both the most likely, as well as potentially the most productive, strategy for movements to assume. One of the most important effects of movements (when they are “successful”) is to induce the creation of new public institutions that contribute to poverty reduction.

Kirmani, N., 2008, ‘The Relationship between Social Movements and Religion in Processes of Social Change: A Preliminary Literature Review’, *Working Paper 23*, IDD, University of Birmingham.

http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/files/resourcesmodule/@random454f80f60b3f4/1226402281_working_paper_23_web_version.pdf

This literature review summarises the main strands of the social movement’s literature, including the role of religion in social movements and the impact of social movements on processes of development and social change (see section 5). It finds there is limited research on the role of social movements in development processes, and many scholars have pointed to the difficulties of establishing a causal relationship between social movement actions and observed change in societies. Attribution is problematic because of the presence of multiple actors alongside social movements, because there is often internal differentiation within social movements, and because ‘social movements are generally tightly interlinked in a complex web of social relations that are responsible for the achievement of development-related goals’. (p. 35) A network approach to understanding social movements, which draws out connections between multiple actors involved in a movement, is more likely to shed light on wider processes of social change than case studies of specific organisations.

Social movements can have multiple levels of impact; they can influence social change through processes of *incorporation* of excluded groups into institutions; they can achieve the *transformation* of political and social institutions; and they can have wider effects on increasing the *democratisation* of society (Giugni 1998). (p.37)

Most discussion of the impact of social movements concentrates on the policy-making arena, where success is often measured in terms of the production of a particular piece of legislation. Social movements can sometimes have an impact on the wider policy-making process, altering institutional processes in the long-term by bringing new groups to the decision-making table or creating new avenues for entry into the policy-making process. Social movements also target the wider public in order to change attitudes and opinions, but little empirical work has been done on the cultural impact of social movements.

Many analysts point out that social movements can have unintended impacts – many ‘successful’ movements have spurred influential counter-movements. For example, the success of women’s movements in India in initiating policy change has concomitantly led to a re-emphasis of traditional gender roles. In cases where social movements are perceived as a threat to structures of power, they often face extreme repression by the state, which hinders their growth and progress. ‘Therefore, any assessment of the positive outcomes of social movement activities must be counter-balanced with recognition of the limitations and possible negative implications of their engagements’ (p. 42).

Mitlin, D., and Bebbington, A., 2006, ‘Social Movements and Chronic Poverty across the Urban-rural Divide: Concepts and Experiences’, *CPRC Working Paper 65*

http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/65Mitlin_Bebbington.pdf

This paper discusses the relevance of social movements to the chronically poor, the representation of the chronically poor through social movements, and the interaction between the state and movements of the poor. It argues there is a need for caution about the

capacities of social movements to shift fundamental processes of exploitation, most notably those related to the primary processes of capitalism.

The power of social movements lies as much in their ability to change the terms of the debate, as it does to influence the specifics of policies and programmes. 'They work primarily on other actors: the changes they seek to effect are in others. This after all is also a definition of power – the ability to influence the actions of others. They challenge how people think of things - the ideas that are hegemonic in a society – and how people do things. In this process of changing the ideas and actions of others, they challenge both social relationships (by challenging how dominant groups have historically handled social relationships with dominated subalterns) and state policies.' (p.23) However, social movements operate in a context in which neoliberal rules of the game dominate, and corporate forces are progressively more powerful in the realm of public policies. In addition, formal practices of democracy (voting, party politics) work to the disadvantages of movements. Therefore, whilst social movements can achieve limited political gains, these gains modify, rather than significantly alter, the processes that determine the creation of poverty. Their influence may not fundamentally change development outcomes.

3. Case studies

Reygadas, L., Ramos, T., and Montoya, G., 2009, 'Pandora's Box: The Implications of Social Movements on Development. Lessons from the Lacandona Jungle in Chiapas', *Social Movement Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 3, pp. 225 - 241

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a913320307~db=all~jumptype=rss>

This article discusses the scope and limitations of social movements in promoting rural local development. It argues the emergence of a powerful social movement in a rural region 'triggers a period of intense [political economic and cultural] transformations with unpredictable outcomes and widely varied, even contradictory, implications for development - which can be positive and negative, intentional and unintentional'. It illustrates this through a case study of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico. (p. 225)

In spite of the abundance of literature available on social movements, few studies have analyzed their impact on development processes. This is because social movements and development have been constructed under different analytical frameworks that rarely overlap, and because there has been a normative assumption that social movements have a positive impact on development.

'It cannot be stated a priori that social movements support or thwart local development without first identifying in what specific ways movements may be constructive or may produce negative implications. In addition, questions about what type of development and who development will benefit must be asked.' (p. 226) Whilst social movements can alter balances of power, weaken clientelism and promote the empowerment of excluded groups, they can also give rise to new forms of clientelism (particularly where the mobilization of one group does not lead to the generalization of rights for the entire population), and they can reinforce social and symbolic boundaries separating the poor from the rest of society (thereby further excluding the excluded). Their primary impact on rural development is through distribution (improving access to basic resources such as education, markets, land), but they can also limit a territory's economic prospects. This is demonstrated through the case of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico. This social movement has won respect for indigenous people and weakened political clientelism in the region, but it has also hindered development initiatives involving cooperation with public institutions and market links. Conversely, it has also had unexpected effects in terms of increasing interest in the jungle; public investment in infrastructure; the presence of several government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the area; and the creation of new incentives and

opportunities for establishing indigenous microenterprises. This case demonstrates there is no linear or simple causality by which social movements trigger rural development.

Osaghae, E E, 2008, 'Social Movements and Rights Claims: The Case of Action Groups in the Niger Delta of Nigeria', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* <http://www.springerlink.com/content/f7561724q6r05485/>

This article examines how the various demands for rights have enabled and shaped the social movements in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. It finds that claims to rights are fundamental to the logic and coherence of these social movements. Rights claims arise predominately around issues of ownership and control over the resources within the region; environmental degradation arising from oil exploration and exploitation; and the reactions of government and the oil multinationals to the protests and agitations of the host communities. The article asks whether the rights demanded are appropriate and capable of redressing the rights deficits and chronic developmental problems of the Niger Delta. It concludes that the prospects for the success of the rights struggle depend on the nature of the state and its engagement with social movements. The leadership of social movements is also crucial to their coherence and effectiveness.

Friedman, S., and Mottiar, S., 2006, 'Seeking the High Ground: The Treatment Action Campaign and the Politics of Morality', Chapter 2 in Ballard et al [ed] *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, University of Kwazulu-Natal Press

This chapter analyses the case of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, which played a pivotal role in the government's decision to provide anti-retroviral medication (ARVs) for people living with HIV/AIDS in 2003. The TAC is repeatedly cited as a model of a social movement because of this success. The chapter explores why the TAC's methods were effective, and whether it offers an approach that could be used elsewhere to enable the poor to claim their rights.

It argues the opportunities and constraints faced by social movements are determined not only by their efforts, but also by the external environment. In post-apartheid South Africa, the growth of social movements is often linked to democratization and the government's macro-economic policy, which worsened social conditions and created new rationales for collective action. Although TAC was a small movement with limited organizational power, its primary source of strength was morality – in other words, its ability to create a 'moral consensus' around the issue of ARVs and to deploy to politics of the moral high ground. It also sought alliances. Its tactic was to engage with and win incremental gains from the state. Whilst TAC's experience in winning a single-issue battle could be learned from, it is not clear whether its approach could win more sustained policy changes and programs.

Mitlin, D., and Mogaladi, J. (forthcoming), 'Social Movements and the Struggle for Shelter: A Case Study of Durban', unpublished paper

This case study examines the social movement organizations working to improve access to shelter within the city of Durban. It finds that movement organizations have made some progress towards improving the options available to their members and addressing members' housing needs, but that these gains appear to be relatively small. Whilst the movements have struggled to influence the bureaucratic state's frameworks of rules and regulations, they nevertheless have an essential contribution to make in terms of housing policy, and also in developing alternative participatory governance practices.

Bebbington, A., Abramovay R., and Chiriboga, M., 2008, 'Social Movements and the Dynamics of Rural Territorial Development in Latin America', *World Development*, Volume 36, Issue 12, December 2008, Pages 2874-2887

http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VC6-4TP7HBM-2&_user=10&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F2008&_alid=1121936431&_rdoc=15&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_cdi=5946&_st=13&_docanchor=&_ct=147480&_acct=C000050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=aa1e6a6ad319a2b9fd7e38e54717bd80

This article summarises four case studies of social movements undertaken as part of a research program analyzing the relationship between social mobilization, governance, and rural development in contemporary Latin America. The case studies were of indigenous people's movements, environmental justice movements, AfroBrazilian movements, and dam-affected people's movements in Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. The cases demonstrate that the effects social movements have on the political economy of rural development depends significantly on the characteristics of the movement. The article concludes that movements have had far more effect on widening the political inclusiveness of rural development than they have on improving its economic inclusiveness and dynamism.

Much writing about social movements is sympathetic to and hopeful about the potential of social movements in fostering processes of social change which enhances justice and well-being. This research sought specifically to test this assumption. It found that across the case studies, the extent to which social movements contributed to forms of territorial governance that foster development that reduces poverty and social inequalities varied greatly.

Whilst movements often induced institutional changes in the sphere of governance, these institutional changes rarely translated into productive changes. The movements sought change and innovation in governance arrangements far more than in economic processes. They struggled for increased levels of inclusion and participation in decision making, local planning, and policy formation, and have more generally sought greater transparency and accountability in the governance of territorially based development processes. 'These institutional changes have neither given rise to nor stimulated transformative processes that modify in any significant sense the opportunities of rural people and particularly of the poorest and most socially excluded'. (p.2878) Several characteristics of the movements are a source of political strength but can simultaneously weaken their capacity to foster pro-poor economic transformations. For example, the strength of shared identity can get in the way of building links with other actors, and "inward lookingness" can mean they lack the ties to break into decision-making, and they face a contradiction between representation and innovation in the sense that they focus more on politics than on markets.

Kamete, A., 2009, "For Enhanced Civic Participation in Local Governance": Calling Tyranny to Account in Harare', *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 59-75

<http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/1/59>

This article examines the case of the Combined Harare Residents' Association (CHRA), a social movement operating in Harare, Zimbabwe. It provides illustrative examples of how CHRA strives to promote and protect the rights and interests of the residents of Harare, including: contesting the legitimacy of the imposed authority; representing citizen views on budgetary processes (including demands for a rates boycott); and contesting the transfer of responsibility for water and sanitation to a new parastatal. The article concludes, however, that state repression at all levels makes it difficult to engage in, let alone sustain, contentious politics, and there has not been much in the way of practical gains for ordinary Harare citizens. Court victories, for example, have not been heeded. Nevertheless, highlighting the state's illegal actions have constituted symbolic and moral victories and CHRA has managed to expose the government's duplicity and some of the flaws in local governance.

Bebbington, A., Mitlin, D., Mogaladi, J., Scurrah, M., (forthcoming), 'Decentring Poverty, Reworking Government: Social Movements and States in the Government of Poverty', unpublished paper

This paper presents the findings of research in South Africa and Peru analysing if and how social movements engage politically, conceptually and tactically with the issue of poverty. It finds that social movements 'have a great deal to say about the ways in which poverty is understood, governed and acted on in society, and that they can also have significant direct impacts on the cultural and political dimensions of "being poor" as well as on the factors that drive different dimensions of poverty. They can contest how discourses of poverty are governed and by whom, how poverty is produced as both category and material experience, and how government intervenes in the pursuit of poverty reduction (as defined by government).' (p. 3).

However, the findings problematize any simple associations between movements and poverty. People do not mobilize primarily around poverty, and social movements are never only movements "of the poor" (important roles are played by political activists, NGOs and other social movement organizations staffed by professionals). Movements need to engage in both production and collective consumption if they are ever to influence citizenship and poverty jointly.

Domike, A., 2007, 'Citizen Engagement and Democracy in the Age of Social Movements', Chapter 13 in Civil Society and Social Movements: Building Sustainable Democracy in Latin America, Inter-American Development Bank
<http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=1555501>

This chapter argues social movements have changed citizen-government relations in Latin America. Furthermore, their durability is assured by their growing representation of women, indigenous leaders and advocates for the urban and rural poor. The contributions of social movements to deepening democratic institutions and improving development projects are extensive. For example;

- The indigenous movements have been important forces in Bolivia and Ecuador to make the electoral and legislative systems more democratic, through participation in campaigns and negotiations.
- Rural social movements broadened access to public decision making, gaining voice and vote in rural areas of Brazil where the social movements have been most active. The quality of life in the MST settlements is measurably better, there is more political participation and the local economy is more dynamic.

Further case studies of social movements (described in detail in other chapters of the book) are summarised on p. 369.

4. Further resources

Books

It was not possible to obtain copies of the following books for the purpose of this report; however, many of them contain additional case studies which could be useful.

Thompson, L., and Tapscott, C., (forthcoming), 'Citizenship and Social Movements: Perspectives from the Global South', Zed Books
<http://www.palgrave-usa.com/catalog/product.aspx?isbn=1848133898>

Ellis, S.D.K. and van Kessel, W.M.J. (eds), 2009, **Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa**, Brill, Leiden.

<http://www.ascleiden.nl/GetPage.aspx?url=/publications/publicatie4717>

Della Porter, D and Diani, M., 2006 **'Social Movements: An Introduction'**, Blackwell publishing

Preview available on google books:

http://books.google.com/books?id=LPzuN07KYgEC&dq=Social+Movements:+An+Introduction&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=3P7b_IYm5&sig=gUTNg12vEDWrGK17nu4_kRcdJo8&hl=en&ei=uV8eS7H2M8iD4Qa68aTdCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CCIQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Polet, F., 2007, **The State of Resistance: Popular Struggles in the Global South**, Zed Books

Preview available on google books:

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=MVc7sRyf4wcC&dq=polet+state+resistance&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=kTmRwDeD0I&sig=nynQkeSZD-gVmzJJmYxDGw0UvqU&hl=en&ei=CHAWS9TTM4bU4Qa4jbDKBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAwQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false

Tadem, T.S.E., 2009, **Localizing and Transnationalizing Contentious Politics: Global Civil Society Movements in the Philippines**, Lexington

[http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpPublications\)/0922DDE84F73CFABC125761D0024D6D4?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/0922DDE84F73CFABC125761D0024D6D4?OpenDocument)

Grabska, K., and Mehta, L., (eds) 2008, **Forced Displacement: Why Rights Matter**, Palgrave Macmillan

<http://www.palgrave.com/PRODUCTS/title.aspx?pid=279069>

Additional information

Author

This query response was prepared by **Claire Mcloughlin** Claire@gdrc.org

Contributors

Nida Kirmani, Religions and Development Programme, University of Birmingham

Lucy Earle, Social Development Direct

Tim Forsythe, London School of Economics

Dr Diana Mitlin, Institute of Development Policy Management, University of Manchester

Robin Vincent, Panos Lonsan

Dr Richard Ballard, University of KwaZulu Natal

Professor Anthony Bebbington, Institute of Development Policy Management, University of Manchester

Stephen Ellis, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden

Ineke van Kessel, African Studies Centre, University of Leiden

Websites visited

African Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, UNRISD, Citizenship DRC, Eldis, University of Manchester Social Movements Group, Institute for Policy Development and Management (IDPM), Centre for Civil Society LSE, UNIFEM, SOAS, Informaworld, Science Direct, GSDRC, Google, Google Scholar

About Helpdesk research reports: Helpdesk reports are based on 2 days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues; and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.

Need help finding consultants?

If you need to commission more in-depth research, or need help finding and contracting consultants for additional work, please contact consultants@gsdrc.org (further details at www.gsdrc.org/go.cfm?path=/go/helpdesk/find-a-consultant&)