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Fostering Social Development through Civic and Political Engagement: How Confidence in Institutions and Agency Matter

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George Warren Brown School of Social Work

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Abstract: *Traditional approaches in social development have neglected the role of politics, civic engagement, and processes of democratization. This paper empirically tests the extent to which civic engagement and political action are shaped by confidence in state and non-state institutions and political and personal agency. The results underscore the importance of enabling social development through inclusive governance and democratization.*

Keywords: social policy, civic & political engagement, international, cross-sectional analysis, political & personal agency, inclusive governance, democratization, confidence in state entities

“When it comes to public policy, the masses of people in the underdeveloped world are the object of politics but hardly anywhere its subject.” – Gunnar Myrdal

“Understanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another.” – Amartya Sen

Social development approaches have only marginally acknowledged the role of politics, and democratization in achieving broad-based development. The tendency, more often than not, is to view social development as an approach that ensures the integration of social and economic sides of the development equation through sound public and social policies. How do we arrive at the right social policies and programs that harmonize economic growth with positive social outcomes? This question takes on added significance when we begin to consider economically and socially disadvantaged populations. These “targets” of social development are more likely to be marginal in shaping the goals of development, be it in their immediate communities, or in the wider society. Populations of great concern for social development practitioners, especially in least developed and developing countries are socially excluded, economically marginalized, and politically disenfranchised.

We argue that far greater attention is required to bring the poor into the fold of governance, enable agency, and realize civic and political engagement to achieve sustained social development. It is critical to place social development strategies within a wider understanding of the ways in which confidence in state and non-state institutions enables both political and personal agency in people, and how such agency enables greater civic and political participation. In this paper, we test a model of how political and personal agency arises out of confidence in institutions, and how agency in turn produces civic and political participation.

A Billion Poor

In 2000, the United Nations, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank Group agreed on eight Millennium Development Goals in an unprecedented act of development cooperation. These goals are: 1) to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, 2) provide universal primary education, 3) promote gender equality and empower women, 4) reduce child mortality, 5) improve maternal health, 6) fight HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and other diseases, 7) promote environmental sustainability, and 8) further work toward rule-based, non-discriminatory trading and financial systems. The Millennium Goals are worthy, and much needed, but rather ambitious. They are ambitious in light of daunting facts: 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1 a day, and 2.8 billion people live on less than \$2 a day. How do we halve the population that is living on less than \$1 a day by 2015? This is the Millennium challenge for social development practitioners.

In announcing these goals, this group also identified critical obstacles to achieving these goals – weak governance, bad policies, human rights abuses, and inequities in income, access to education, health, and gender disparities. The challenge for the field of social development is to envision ways of addressing the needs of a billion poor living at the margins of societies that are undemocratic and plagued by bad governance. The poor have no voice in the development

discourse, or in their own communities. Social development conceptualized as linking planned social change and social intervention with economic policies is fine. However, how do we make this a reality for the billion poor? How does one engage in planned social change, or harmonize social policies with economic growth, when populations that are in most need do not see state and non-state institutions as functioning for them? Human agency is possible only when the ordinary citizens have confidence in those state and non-state organizations that structure and enable them to engage in social development in their communities, regions, and society.

Social development efforts at addressing poverty must not only focus on the state as the principal agent of advancing social and economic development, but also toward civil society as a critical factor in enabling sustainable development. It is important to pay attention to the ways both state and non-state actors can contribute towards planned social change. This necessitates an understanding of the central role of human agency and how institutions can mediate human choice (Hyden, 1997). While the exact count of democracies in the world today is subject to debate, there is greater agreement over the idea that democracy is good for development. Democratic societies are defined by a vibrant civil society and a state that is focused on inclusive governance. A synergistic relationship between civil society and a democratic state is the basis for good governance. Strategies for sustained social development have to be conceived and designed in this new milieu of democratization where there is a renewed emphasis on civil society, inclusive governance, and state-citizen partnerships. This new focus is predicated on the fundamental ability of all citizens to voice their needs, and concerns, and to affect the course of development. This set of processes, we argue, is foundational for engaging in effective social development.

This paper proceeds by exploring the foundations and pathways of social development. Next, we present four main propositions and empirically test them using data from India from the 1995-97 wave of the World Values Survey (WVS). In the final section, we emphasize factors such as personal and political agency, civic engagement, confidence in institutions, and political action as foundational to social development.

Foundations and Pathways to Social Development

Today, the state is under great pressure from forces of democratization, growing markets, and an increasingly engaged civil society. While the state is no longer a politically and financially viable source of public goods, the markets do not have sufficient incentives to provide social services and other public goods essential for the well-being of families and communities. The opportunities for effective social development perhaps lie in forging partnerships between communities and local governments to supply and maintain essential public goods and resources. Thus, social development strategies must not only encompass planned change undertaken by the state, but also focus on affecting development through active participation of local communities, and strengthening of civil society to represent the interests and preferences of people, and leveraging social relationships and structures to affect economic outcomes (Serageldin & Grootaert, 2000). This implies that two processes are crucial for effective social development – active civic engagement, and reorientation of the role of the state.

State-society synergy amounts to a reorientation of the state toward partnership with elements of civil society, and enable inclusive governance to address the needs and preferences of its people. State-community partnerships have the potential of contributing to the vibrancy of civil society and consolidation of democracy as the interests of disadvantaged and disenfranchised become well represented in these partnerships (Haynes, 1997). However, democratic and open systems seldom develop from the top -- guided by centralized states. They are more likely to emerge, deepen, and consolidate over time from the bottom up. Social development, therefore, must enable citizens in various aggregations of family, community, region, and nations to be partners with the state to determine the variety of policy and program strategies for affecting their well-being.

Economic development does not automatically transform into social goods, unless citizens most likely to benefit from such transformation have an influence over the development process. A significant way in which citizens influence this process is through political acts. Sustained social development is realistic in societies where there is a higher rate of civic and political engagement. Pursuit of social development merely as a technology is to overlook the full potential of a social development approach, and even more grave is to discount the ability of ordinary citizens to represent their own interests through civic and political means. Sustained social development must focus on capacity building and bringing citizens, previously in the margins, into the fold of civic and political representation. Underlying our focus on civic and political engagement, is an emphasis on political efficacy – “the self-confidence and sense of competence on the part of the citizenry that their political action may produce a change in policy or a redress of grievances” (Diamond, 1999, p.171). A social development approach, which gives prominence to civic and political actions of citizens, ensures that economic development is widely distributed and there is sustained political engagement by citizens in shaping the nature and outcome of development. In situating social development within a broader context of civic and political participation, we are distinguishing it from other forms of participation that fail to “...engage with the distribution and operations of power within local communities and the wider society,” and therefore offer little to marginalized populations (Hildyard, Hegde, Wolvekamp, & Reddy, 2001, pp. 68-69).

The state, however, also has a significant role in framing the role of citizens, civil society actors, and the institutional arrangements that generate political and personal agency in citizens – precursors to civic and political engagement (Agrawal & Yadama, 1997; Degnbol-Martinussen, 2002; Lowndes & Wilson, 2001; Yadama & DeWeese-Boyd, 2001). “To elevate the sovereignty of the citizens from fiction to reality demands an appreciation of the role of civil society in assembling citizens to assert their rights” (Sobhan, 2002, p.154). Democratic institutions foster conditions for the formation of voluntary associations and generate confidence in state and non-state institutions (Paxton, 2002). Under such conditions, citizens derive agency to act collectively on social and political fronts. Petro, in explaining high rates of economic performance in the Novgorod region of Russia, firmly concludes that the state is a significant factor in fostering social trust, and an important exogenous factor is, “...stable state institutions that allow for predictable engagement among social actors, and a credible system of enforcing social norms” (Petro, 2001, p.241). This necessitates conceptualizing the role of the state from one that is distant from people to one that is more responsive, transparent, and accountable to citizens.

Agency is a function of the confidence and trust in state and non-state institutions that they will respect citizen opinion, input, and even dissent. Such respect is instrumental in generating faith that citizens efforts are not to be undermined, but respected, and enabled; that citizen dissent will generate appropriate response and promote dialogue between citizens and state, and not reprisal. Confidence in institutions is instrumental in the context of development as most development programs are not contractual arrangements, but rely on citizen response and participation. When citizens have little confidence in the legal, media, and state institutions, and feel that these institutions do not represent their interests, they become alienated, and development channels offered by state and donor organizations are rejected in favor of undemocratic radical insurgencies. Foley and Edwards summarize the conditions that states can create in promoting or undermining citizenship (Foley & Edwards, 1996, p.48):

Where the state is unresponsive, its institutions are undemocratic, or its democracy is ill designed to recognize and respond to citizen demands, the character of collective action will be decidedly different than under a strong and democratic system. Citizens will find their efforts to organize for civil ends frustrated by state policy--at some times actively repressed, at others simply ignored. Increasingly aggressive forms of civil association will spring up, and more and more ordinary citizens will be driven into either active militancy against the state or self-protective apathy.

Citizen confidence in state and non-state institutions is fundamental to fostering and sustaining agency among citizens.

In turn, civic engagement and political action on the part of citizens is more likely upon realizing political and personal agency. Civic engagement among citizens also gives rise to greater political action. Agency however is paramount and antecedent to both civic and political engagement. Political and personal agency has to do with a person's capacity to act autonomously and with free will to demand attention and affect not only one's own life, but also the social, political, and economic structures in their immediate community and wider society. It is capacity to influence political and public opinion to pressure state functionaries to deliver on the promises of the government. Agency accords individuals and collective of citizens a central role in development. The benchmark of progress in development is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced, and the subsequent progress in human development as a function of the free agency of people (Sen, 1999). Political and civil liberties give rise to political and personal agency and are important for three reasons (Sen, 1999, p.148):

- 1) Their *direct* importance in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of political and social participation);
- 2) Their *instrumental* role in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including the claims of economic needs);
- 3) Their *constructive* role in the conceptualization of 'needs' (including the understanding of 'economic needs' in a social context).

Fundamental to social development are these linkages between confidence in state and non-state institutions, political and personal agency derived from such a confidence, and the subsequent civic and political engagement on the part of citizens (See Figure 1). We now turn to an empirical test of the foundational elements of social development.

Propositions

We propose to test the following propositions that we have argued as being foundational to social development:

1. Confidence in state and non-state institutions promotes greater personal and political agency among citizens;
2. Personal and political agency give impetus to higher levels of civic engagement and a higher propensity to engage in political acts;
3. Civic engagement – limited or abundant – creates low or high confidence in citizens to undertake political actions;
4. Confidence in state and non-state institutions also directly affects the propensity of citizens to act in political ways.

We test the above propositions using the WVS data set, which allows us to examine a range of propositions that few other rival data sets allow. Data is available for countries that are at various stages of democratization. We tested all of the above propositions on the latest wave of data collected in India. We selected India to test our model for several reasons. With a population of a billion people, fifty-five years of democracy, and a significant proportion of its citizens in extreme poverty, India offers a good test case for examining how agency affects civic and political participation. The latest wave of data from India is also complete for testing the propositions that we have outlined. For this analysis, we will confine ourselves to data from the largest democracy in the world.

Methodology

Sample

This study used the data for India (n=2,040) from the third wave (1995-97) of the WVS. The WVS enables cross-national and cross-sectional analysis of change in values and social norms in diverse societies around the world and includes surveys collected from over 60 countries ranging from established democracies to transitioning states (Inglehart et al., 2000). Unlike previous waves, the 1995-97 WVS wave covered non-Western countries, which facilitates an understanding of the democratization process in many developing societies. The wave data included topics such as associational membership, volunteering, and decision-making freedom. The data were collected using face-to-face interviews with respondents 18 years and older in their national language.

In each country, a multi-stage, random selection of sampling points is carried out, with points drawn from all administrative regional units after stratification by region and degree of urbanization (Inglehart, 2000, p.7). The data for India were collected from 16 states in proportion to their population and stratified to be representative of age, sex, and region. The Indian sample was stratified in such a way that it over represents urban and literate residents (Inglehart, 2000). Consequently, the analysis presented here can be generalized to the urban population. Nearly 60 percent of the sample is male, and the average age of a respondent was 36 years. Nearly 56 percent of the sample identified themselves as belonging to the middle class. Approximately 68 percent of the sample was functionally literate.

Measures

The model included twenty variables that represented four latent constructs, namely confidence in institutions, personal and political agency, civic engagement, and political action (See Table 1).

Confidence in institutions measured the level of confidence respondents had in a variety of institutions. Specifically, respondents indicated how much confidence they had in both state and non-state institutions. Three indicators measured personal and political agency – the level of interest in politics, the frequency of discussion of political matters among individuals, and the respondents' perceived level of decision-making freedom. These three measures reflect an individual's agency to engage in politics, to influence others, and the opportunity to choose freely. Membership in voluntary associations is reflective of civic engagement. Civic engagement was measured through membership in a variety of organizations. Political action measures included participation in a range of political activities. This measure is distinct from traditional conceptualization of political participation in that, it takes non-electoral forms of participation into account.

Model

Following the recommendations of Kline (1998), all variables in our model were examined for any deviations from normality. Using the two-step approach (Schumaker & Lomax, 1996), we first analyzed the measurement model and then the structural model. This sequential process allowed for an assessment of validity and reliability of variables operationalized for measuring the different constructs in our theoretical model. All the measurement models exhibited good fit indices. Given the ordinal nature of the variables, we tested our model using Weighted Least Squares (WLS) estimation.

Results

Following the guidelines highlighted by Chen, Bollen, Paxton, Curran, and Kirby (2001), the overall model indicates a good fit [χ^2 (146), (N = 800) = 936.47, $p = 0.00$] (See Figure 1). The use of chi-square is based on the assumption that the model is applicable to the population. Such an assumption does not hold well in empirical research (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). Hu and Bentler (1995) show that large sample sizes influence the chi-square statistic; large sample sizes tend to diminish the probability of arriving at a chi-square statistic that is non-significant. Therefore, it is better to deploy a number of different fit statistics. The Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Goodness-of-fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness-of-fit Index (AGFI) indicate an excellent model fit [IFI = 0.92, GFI = 0.96, and AGFI = 0.95]. The Root Mean Square Error (RMSEA) value of 0.08 also signifies a good fit (Paxton, 2002).

Table 1. Variables Used in the Analysis

Construct	Value Categories
Confidence in Institutions	
I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them?	1 = A great deal 2 = Quite a lot 3 = Not very much 4 = None at all
V137. The legal system	
V138. The press	
V139. Television	
V141. The police	
V142. The government in your capital	
V144. The Parliament	
V145. The Civil Service	
Personal and Political Agency	
V37. When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?	1 = Frequently 2 = Occasionally 3 = Never 9 = Don't know
V117. How interested would you say you are in politics?	1 = Very interested 2 = Somewhat interested 3 = Not very interested
V66. Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. How much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out?	4 = Not at all interested 9 = Don't know
	Likert Scale: 1 = None at all 10 = Great deal
Civic Engagement	
Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organizations. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an active member, or not a member of that type of organization?	1 = Active member 2 = Inactive member 3 = Don't belong
V31. Labor Union	
V33. Environmental Organization	
V34. Professional Association	
V35. Charitable Organization	
V36. Any other voluntary Organization	

Table 1. Continued

Political Action

I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it, or would never, under any circumstances do it.

1 = Have done

2 = Might do

3 = Would never do

V118. Signing a petition

V119. Joining in boycotts

V120. Attending lawful demonstrations

V121. Joining unofficial strikes

V122. Occupying buildings or factories

Direct effects

Confidence in institutions has a statistically significant direct effect on personal and political agency (Table 2). This effect also represents the total effect on personal and political agency in the model. Thirteen percent of variance in personal and political agency is explained by confidence in institutions. Confidence in institutions also has a statistically significant direct effect on political action (Table 1). Eighteen percent of variance in political action is explained by confidence in institutions.

Personal and political agency in turn has a statistically significant direct effect on civic engagement (Table 2). However, only two percent of variance in civic engagement is explained by personal and political agency. Personal and political agency also has a statistically significant direct effect on political action (Table 2). Civic engagement has a statistically significant direct effect on political action.

Indirect effects

Confidence in institutions has a small but statistically significant indirect effect on civic engagement. However, confidence in institutions has a moderate and statistically significant indirect effect on political action. Personal and political agency has a strong, but statistically significant indirect effect on political action.

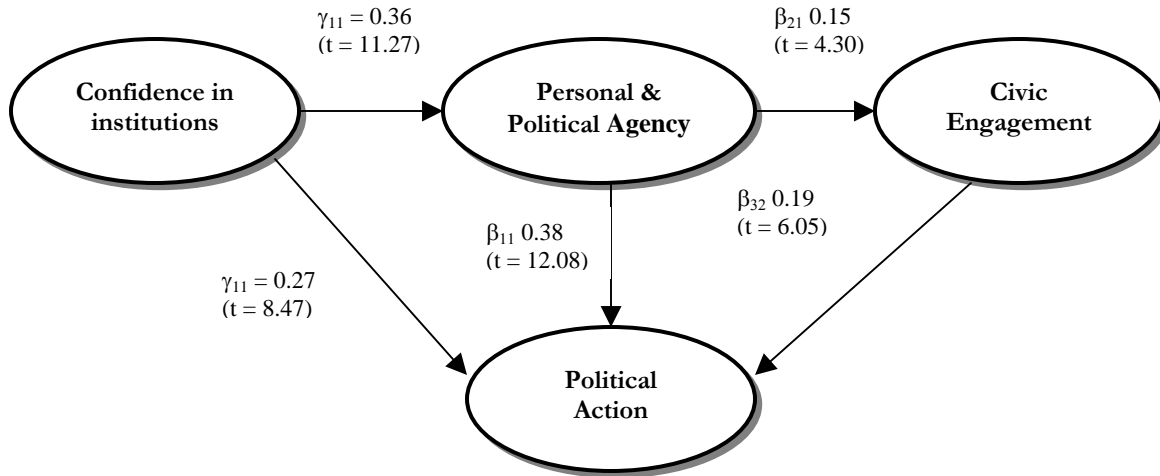
Table 2. Standardized Effects, t-values, and Variance Explained (%)

Path	Effect	t-value (S.E.)	Variance explained (%)
<i>Agency</i>			13
Confidence in institutions to Personal and political agency	0.36	11.27 (0.03)	
<i>Civic Engagement</i>			2
Personal and political agency to Civic engagement	0.15	4.30 (0.03)	
Confidence in institutions to Civic engagement through Personal and political agency	0.05	4.19 (0.01)	
<i>Political Action</i>			35
Civic engagement to Political action	0.19	6.05 (0.04)	
Personal and political agency to Political action	0.38	12.08 (0.04)	
Personal and political agency to Political action through Civic engagement	0.03	3.70 (0.01)	
Confidence in institutions to Political action	0.27	8.47 (0.04)	
Confidence in institutions to Political action through Personal and political agency and Civic engagement	0.15	9.18 (0.02)	

Total effects

Confidence in institutions has a statistically significant and strong total effect on political action. The total effect of personal and political agency on political action is similar in magnitude to that of confidence in institutions. Confidence in institutions, personal and political agency, and civic engagement together explain 35 percent of variance in political action.

Figure 1
Structural Model of the Effect of Confidence in State and Non-State Institutions and Agency on Civic Engagement and Political Action



Discussion and Conclusion

Our paper is a call to pay greater attention to personal and political agency of citizens, and the civic and political processes in social development practice and research. Better and more sustainable social development outcomes are possible when citizens and civil society groups have greater say and control in the development process. Our analysis reveals that personal and political agency in citizens is a function of the level of confidence citizens have in state entities, as well as other institutions such as the press, television media, and the law that offset the power of the state. Empirical evidence indicates that people’s trust and confidence in the media, legal institutions, police and parliamentary systems enables a greater sense of control and choice over their lives, and political efficacy. Moreover, statistical results reveal that such confidence in significant institutions propels citizens into political action. The analysis also indicates that agency is significant in affecting civic and political engagement. Overall, favorable empirical evidence in this paper and in other research on participation in the villages of India suggests that in locating social development in the wider processes of governance, we might achieve larger gains for the very poor and marginal (Agrawal & Yadama, 1997; Yadama & DeWeese-Boyd, 2001).

While confidence in institutions has a strong direct effect on political participation, agency has an even stronger direct effect on political participation. Agency also has a smaller but significant effect on civic engagement, which in turn has a significant effect on political action. These significant effects indicate the importance of citizen faith and trust in state and non-state institutions, and their subsequent impact in fostering political and personal efficacy and civic participation. Results from our analysis indicate that people with greater confidence in institutions and with personal and political agency are more likely to engage in political acts. The amount of variance explained in civic engagement and its significance in the model is not as strong as expected. A smaller role for civic engagement is perhaps an outcome of the measures

used for civic engagement in the WVS, and the way civic engagement manifests itself in India and other developing countries. Other scholars have commented on the inadequacy of civic participation measures, especially in reference to civic engagement (Krishna, 2002). Krishna laments that Western conceptualizations of associational activity are imprecise and fail to account for a rich array of associational activity that is informal and falls below the radar of formal organizations – “in developing countries, particularly in the rural areas, it is informal rather than formal associations that have most value for citizens” (Krishna, 2002, p.5). The relatively weak explanatory power of civic engagement in our model is perhaps due to a bias in the measure toward membership in formal associations.

The analysis, however, highlights the central role of personal and political agency in affecting both civic engagement and political acts – fundamental for advancing social development through active and meaningful participation of people. While we argue for a greater attention to agency, civic, and political engagement, the results also underscore the importance of the state, the press, and legal institutions in generating confidence and concomitant agency in citizens. Prominent scholars have stressed the important role of the state in fostering trust, and institutionalizing a system in which credible commitments are made and norms enforced (Knight, 1992; North, 1990; Ostrom, 1996).

Our study points to a need for greater attention in social development literature to the larger processes of governance, and the inter-relationships between state and citizen action and their potential importance for development outcomes. On the positive side, when citizens become mobilized and social development strategies are pursued in tandem with civic and political action, there is a greater likelihood of larger social and economic good. On the other hand, when citizens lack confidence in institutions, social development strategies must first focus their efforts on bridging this chasm by creating conditions where citizens reveal their preferences that are asserted on state and non-state institutions. Future work in social development should focus on cross-national comparisons that highlight the connections between democratization and social development. There is abundant theoretical discussion arguing for and against social development and the nature of social development, but scant empirical work exists, which examines the conditions under which social development is most likely or sustainable. This must be the future course of social development research.

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