

The Power of Numbers, Gender Dynamics and Community Forestry Groups

Extended abstract

The social inclusion of the disadvantaged, especially their inclusion in substantial numbers, has long been seen as a means of giving them voice within institutions of governance (especially of environmental governance), so that they can call attention to the issues that deeply affect their lives. The power of numbers thus becomes a means of enhancing social equity and empowerment, and is implicit in the global lobbying for quotas on grounds of gender, caste, race, and so on. Some scholars have argued, however, that for effectiveness, political consciousness among the disadvantaged is of central importance. Sapiro (1981: 704), for instance, stresses that ‘political systems are not likely to represent previously unrepresented groups until those groups develop a sense of their own interests and place demands on the system. This requires the development of political consciousness and political activism based on this new group consciousness’.

More recently, another concept has been gaining prominence, namely that of social and solidarity economy (SSE), which too places emphasis on group cohesiveness and a conscious recognition of shared interests by the disadvantaged, but *assumes* (by default) that these groups already possess these attributes rather than needing to develop them. Although the concept of SSE is still evolving and contentious, there is a convergence in conceptualizing it as constituted of various forms of citizens’ associations (social movements, self-help groups, and so on) which cooperate for production and exchange in inclusive ways, and interact with outside institutions, such as state and markets, on behalf of citizens.¹ Indeed much is being claimed on its behalf. Some scholars even present the SSE as an alternative to capitalist forms of development (Dash 2013).

Implicit in the idea of solidarity itself—although rather little theorised—is the notion of group cohesiveness, connectivity and mutual support among the members in dealing with the state or markets. But the assumption that solidarity already exists, rather than something that has to be brought about, remains a lacuna in SSE discussions. Moreover, SSE is depicted typically in terms of groups interacting with institutions and organizations *outside* the groups, to the neglect of *intra*-group dynamics and of inequalities and exclusions within groups. That intra-group dynamics can impinge centrally on successful cooperation within the group—as well as on the group’s effectiveness in dealing with extra-group institutions—is relatively little explored within this emerging debate. Questions of how local groups can expand their outreach to the national level and beyond also remain nascent and underdeveloped. These aspects have relevance not only in relation to the SSE but also in relation to social movements around the environment as well as food sovereignty (see e.g. Agarwal 2014).

This paper seeks to address several aspects of the above debates. First, it brings into the discussion on the SSE the neglected dimension of within-group dynamics as predicated on structural inequalities such as gender and class. Both forms of inequality can affect the way group members engage with one another, take decisions, affect outcomes and interact beyond the group. In other words, a group’s social composition (such as the proportion of women in decision-making) becomes important not only on grounds of equity and inclusion but also for the group’s effective functioning and sustainability.

¹ See the range of articles presented at the conference on Social and Solidarity Economy, UNRISD, Geneva, 6-8 May 2013.

The question of the proportion of women in community decision-making groups raises at least three conceptual issues—that of critical mass; of heterogeneity between women; and of the commonality (or otherwise) of women’s interests across socio-economic difference. These issues are explored in the paper not only conceptually and also by testing their empirical validity.

Secondly, the paper seeks to demonstrate that simply increasing the numbers of the disadvantaged to raise their proportions within public institutions can, in given contexts, make a significant difference to outcomes, even without an explicit recognition or group articulation of individual interests by the disadvantaged. For this purpose, quantitative and qualitative data from the author’s detailed primary survey conducted in 2000-01 on community forestry institutions (CFIs) in India and Nepal, to explore the effect of their gender and class composition on the ability of women (especially the poor) to participate effectively, and the impact of their participation.

The empirical findings show that the aims of both efficiency (biomass regeneration and improved forest condition) and distributional equity (e.g. less firewood shortages which increase women’s work time) will improve with more women, and especially with poor, landless women on the executive committees of CFIs. One-third is found to be a close approximation of the critical mass needed for women to be effective, but for equality it is necessary to go beyond this proportion.

Thirdly, the paper outlines some of the ways in which women’s numbers and voice in local institutions can be increased and the groups scaled up (such as by forming federations) to strengthen their reach beyond the local, and their bargaining power with the state. In this context, the paper also reflects on the mechanisms by which greater cohesion and solidarity could be promoted among rural women, to enable them to present a more collective (and hence more effective) articulation of their interests. This could include forging strategic alliances, say between CFIs and Self-help Groups (SHGs), or federations of CFIs and SHGs. These alliances could be based on implicitly shared interests, even if there is no explicit forging of group identity.

Over time, however, such links have the potential of evolving into networks guided by social solidarity considerations. This would add to the effectiveness of numbers. But more work is needed to establish common cause across difference, such that a group of individual women (or men) can become a collectivity, working not only for itself but for the larger public good. This could start locally through processes of democratic deliberation. But structural support from gender progressive agencies—whether linked with political parties or civil society—could help propel these processes forward. Meanwhile, numbers, even in themselves, continue to command considerable power.

References in the extended abstract

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