

From the Fringes to the Fore

Redressing Marginalization

Despite the strides India has taken, several sections of the population are sidelined in the process of development. Such marginalized communities find access to government schemes and entitlements exacerbated by an unyielding administration which must make adjustments to create the space for their needs. But how can that be done?

In taking stock of the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals, it has become clear that despite sizeable gains, many have been left behind. Those left out have most often been the marginalized, consigned as they are to the fringes of society. They have relatively little control over their lives; are stigmatized and at the receiving end of negative attitudes; and public service delivery often passes them by. Those belonging to a marginalized group might have several social roles and identities which intersect to a greater disadvantage. For instance, a female sex worker, marginalized on account of her gender, is also marginalized on account of moral positions to her work. Multiple identities can produce a multiplication of disadvantages and limit further, the possibility of accessing the basic entitlements and benefits from social welfare schemes.

It is assumed that the marginalized represent only a fraction of society as a whole – yet significant populations have been unable to gain from their entitlements and opportunities, and the issue of how to include marginalized communities continues to vex implementation practitioners. As an example, marginalization has been closely associated with religious affiliation. Yet Indian Muslims are 172 million in absolute numbers. Not a small population. Tribal communities constitute 8.6% of the Indian population and experience marginalization as do Dalits, the disabled, TB patients and LGBTQIA among others.

In the face of these numbers, it seems unlikely that any government could disregard the claim to public services of these marginalized groups. However it must be understood that they do not in fact constitute a 'community' and for the most part (unless geographically constrained as in some primitive tribal groups) are widely dispersed in society at large. For each marginalized community, the causes of exclusion and nature of problems are unique. The attitudes of the marginalized to their own sense of community may be colored by the other identities that they own, e.g., sexual orientation, statehood, income class etc. The nature and type of exclusion from universal entitlements differ across marginalized communities, making a 'one size fits all' solution practically impossible to operationalize.

To enable meaningful transformation of the status quo, taking both sides of the coin into consideration is pertinent. Thus, the key question is not what but how; how can meaningful transformation of existing structures of power and exclusion be achieved, so that the needs and concerns of those left behind are adequately addressed?

Policy making and implementation challenges

As individuals, distinct and separate from each other and each other's concerns, marginalization poses a different kind of challenge to community empowerment. The limits of development are quickly reached if the marginalized do not enter relations of reciprocity and assume broader identities. By mobilizing the community to take the reins of empowerment in its own hands, and working collectively to achieve its goal, the marginalized are not only better placed to negotiate their circumstances but also have recourse to tangible social capital in times of need. However, mere collectivization is not enough. Given their relative power, limited capabilities, and poor representation in political structures and decision-making bodies, the marginalized face a considerable disadvantage.

Intentions of the state to build a participatory democracy translate into action only when the implementation of programs and laws is initiated. This demands the active involvement of the community – often through community-based organizations at the grass roots level. These are repositories of information on local needs and can articulate the interests of the marginalized community to the government officials involved in implementation.

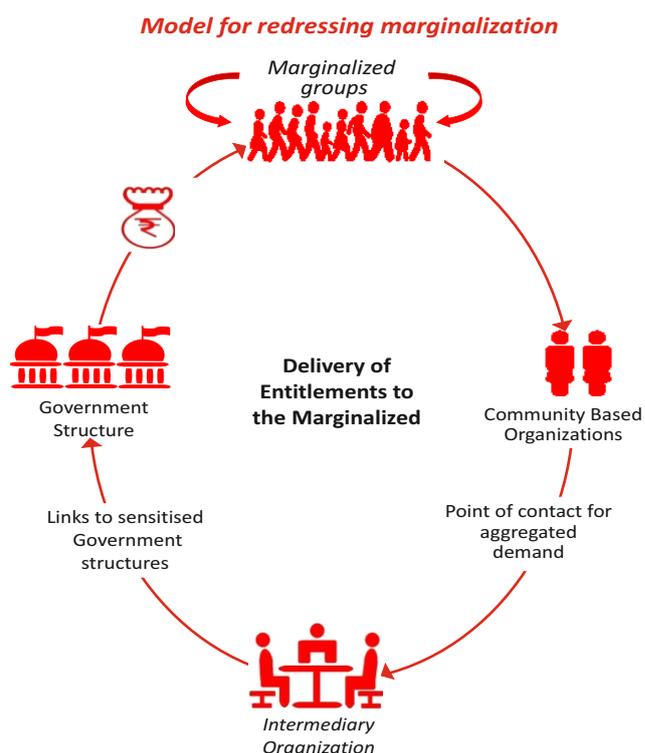
Constitutional guarantees of equality are likewise meaningless without actual mainstreaming of marginalized groups through sustained action at every level of government. Policies and institutional arrangements are meant to ensure equitable and inclusive access to basic services for all sections of society including the marginalized community. But it is during the implementation of the programs that the state apparatus realizes the practical hurdles that plague programs envisaged by the bureaucracy.

Responsibility is shared between different departments, and so is ownership. Concerned district and block level officials implement the schemes as per the rules and procedures leaving little scope to accommodate the specific problems encountered by the marginalized groups. Checks and controls are built into the functioning of government, transforming the guidance contained in program documents into a bible of procedures, strengthened by precedent. To find space within the generally unbending steel frame of government schemes is thus critical. This requires readiness to review existing provisions in the book of rules, to create ab initio action, and work around the objections emanating from the poorly informed within the government machinery. Creation of administrative wherewithal, such as to ensure easy availability of required documentation, is also essential.

Workable model to include marginalized

Marginalized communities have found themselves repeatedly ignored when approaching the government or society at large. Communities such as the sexual minority have had repeated confrontations with certain arms of government – in particular the police. Over time, this has resulted in a deep mistrust of the state, leaving them suspicious and isolated.

The core of social transformation for the marginalized must rely on governments to opening a dialogue with marginalized communities, facilitated by the intermediary organizations. Last mile delivery of social welfare in a fair manner will remain contingent on how the three stakeholders - the administrative face of government, the intermediary organization, and marginalized communities - can create synergies so that the disadvantaged can exercise their right to speak, be heard and influence.



The role of community-based organizations in generating demand cannot be overlooked. Community based organizations offer a safe space for the marginalized and create a community microcosm that builds trust; intermediary organizations bring knowledge of benefits and means of accessing them to the notice of members. Not only this, these organizations offer assurance to government agencies that the demand is appropriate and a one-point contact that makes their task easier. Yet knowledge about government schemes, eligibility criteria and procedures to apply for identity documentation among marginalized communities is limited.

Intermediary organizations fulfill the critical role of connecting the excluded with the systems of the mainstream, gathering information on what must

be done to receive entitlements, and aggregating the demands of the disenfranchised. In a program carried out by Centre For Advocacy Research among female and transgender sex workers in south India, community coordinators drawn from a pool of



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community based organizations helped the local administration to not only reach out to a large number of sex workers and sexual minority but also eased the process of garnering support and acceptance within the community. They were pivotal in bringing the community to the forefront in negotiations with the local administration. This ensured that the local bureaucracy was conscious of the needs of the marginalized community and its behavior saw a gradual change.

The final and arguably, the most critical cog in this system is the government department responsible for providing services to the marginalized. Articulating the interests of marginalized community with the steel frame of bureaucracy needs careful strategizing. To open the lines of communication, it is necessary to identify key actors as entry points. For instance, the south India project began with engagement with champions within the government system, such as a District Collector, a District Judge, and officials of the Women's Development Corporation. These engagements opened avenues of support at the district wide level, bringing other departments on board. But gaining entry to governance mechanisms and institutionalizing memory within government systems is a slow and arduous process. Enthusiasm on part of government departments to address the problems of marginalized community is generally linked to shared wins in the form of coverage targets for schemes met. In this context, intermediary organizations serve an important role in pointing out benefits on either side of the table.

The Starting Point

The starting point for work to address inequities in entitlements is more often than not, a mandate from the central level. Such a mandate is required to garner the support of administrative authorities of various public departments at the state level. Creating a mandate for inclusion of marginalized women could be located in the National Commission for Women. Working with National Commission for Scheduled Tribes might be the proper locus for an agenda to safeguard the interests of tribal people. Though administration and implementation of schemes are dealt with multiple departments such as Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Commission can, through its statutory powers require certain actions be taken by the concerned departments, enabling the agenda to be taken to conclusion.

The mandate must then be translated to the ground level through the relevant departments. This requires painstaking work on the part of both intermediary and the department, to ensure that the wording of procedures allow the application of the entitlements to the beneficiary. At the community organization level, it is necessary for the intermediary to work closely not only to generate the demand for the benefit, but also to ensure that eligibility requirements can be met by each person for whom benefits are being sought. Platforms that bring the three key stakeholders together serve the very important purpose of sensitizing government to the needs of the marginalized, especially if they are supported to make their own testimonies, and in sensitizing the marginalized to the genuine difficulties that the departments might face, and their efforts to address the shortcomings in their procedures. This builds greater respect on all sides, making for a collaborative and cooperative environment.

Way forward

Over the years, as marginalized communities have been notified, the Indian government has evolved mechanisms to include their specific needs. The Special Component Plan, consisting of the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan and the Tribal Sub-Plan commits resources applied to the special needs of

