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Invited Spaces, Invited Participation: Effects of Greater Participation on Accountability in Service Delivery

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Introduction

Governments around the world have undertaken institutional reforms aimed at opening up spaces and inviting citizens to participate in directing and monitoring public service delivery. These spaces have taken different shapes and forms, reflecting the evolution of debates on participation and accountability, as well as the influence of donors, and civil society-led accountability efforts. Often backed by legal and constitutional guarantees, these are spaces where citizens are invited by the state to become part of its governance machinery. Some of these spaces are supported by institutions created through decentralization reforms, where citizens are invited to participate in the state's deliberative processes. In others, citizens are invited to assist in the implementation and administration of programs, and in yet others, invitations have been extended to scrutinize and monitor the everyday operations of the state. In all its different shapes and forms, the institutional landscape for development is now crowded with "invited spaces" that are part of the new development blueprint.[1]

The underlying assumption behind this push for invited spaces is that participation can significantly enhance the state's performance by making it both more responsive and more accountable. Increased dialogue and consultation between the state and citizens could help ensure that local needs and demands are heard and that decision makers have better feedback on effectiveness of their decision. This, in turn, enhances responsiveness. Moreover, participation generally results in greater public scrutiny as citizens involve themselves in monitoring and assessing performance. Participation through invited spaces thus has the

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potential to increase the quality and intensity of citizen-state interaction and in so doing, subject the state to continuous and noisier forms of scrutiny. Consequently, accountability is strengthened.

In keeping with the global trend, India too has witnessed a slew of reforms aimed at carving institutionalized spaces for citizens to participate. These range from efforts to decentralize by creating elected governments at the town, district, block and village levels; and creating platforms for participation through mechanisms such as the Gram Sabha (village level public meetings). In a parallel form of decentralization, sector-specific user groups that invite citizens to plan, administer, and monitor implementation of public programs funded by center and state government have also been formed. More recently, the Government of India passed The Right to Information Act (2005), which has created new axes around which citizens can mobilize and demand accountability from the state. Other reforms include increasingly common provisions for citizen consultations, oversight committees, and social audits as features in many of the state's development programs.

Despite this profusion and diversity of invitations, many questions regarding how these spaces actually work in practice remain: Who participates and how? Does simply creating new spaces bring about meaningful participation? And, perhaps most crucially, can participation improve accountability for service delivery? This article is an effort to contribute to the small but growing body of work that addresses these questions. Through an analytical review of India's participatory landscape, and by drawing on existing empirical research as well as new research on citizen participation, this article analyzes the effectiveness of and further potential for invited spaces to enhance accountability for service delivery. Through this review, some preliminary thoughts on lessons learnt and measures to strengthen these spaces are also offered. Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, this article highlights some of the bigger questions, concerns and risks that the new emphasis on participation comes with and argues for the need for more research to understand the implications of these new approaches.

The article is structured as follows. Section one discusses the evolution of debates for citizen participation and accountability and traces India's landscape of invited spaces in this context. Section two draws on existing and new empirical evidence to understand the effectiveness of these spaces before offering preliminary recommendations. Section three concludes.

Invited Spaces, Invited Participation and Public Accountability[2]

Contextualizing the Landscape of India's Invited Spaces

Non-electoral citizen participation first captured the center stage in debates on accountability in the mid 1990s owing to a wave of writings that documented how citizen participation in planning and implementation of projects not only increased the effectiveness of public service delivery but also strengthened accountability and reduced corruption.[3] These writings emphasized that greater 'state-society' synergies were one of the best ways to strengthen government accountability and in so doing added a new dimension to understandings of state-society relations.[4] Accordingly, citizen participation was actively encouraged as a means to ensure responsiveness and accountability.

This period also witnessed the growth of the idea of democratic decentralization in which participation and accountability gained a place of prominence. The argument centered on the logic that decentralization, by bringing governments closer to people, opens up possibilities for citizen participation, giving them greater representation and a significant voice in public policy decisions which would lead to greater accountability.[5] These initiatives were accompanied by a proliferation of avenues in which citizens were invited to directly participate in local decision-making. Bolivia, for instance, passed the Law of Popular Participation, which included processes for demand-driven public expenditure among other opportunities for participation.

These participatory initiatives were significantly different from "community participation" frameworks of the 1970s and 1980s. Community participation viewed citizens as "beneficiaries" whose involvement can help enhance efficiency goals. In the accountability framework on the other hand, participation is about an assertion of citizenship where citizens engage with the state as "makers" and "shapers" of policy that affects their everyday lives.[6] Participation in these settings goes beyond older practices of arms length consultation. It is about shared responsibilities for decision-making in establishing policies and allocating resources and, thus, is about the exercise of meaningful citizenship.[7]

In India, the first wave of participatory reforms came in the form of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments that sought to decentralize government powers and resources to lower levels of governments.

The amendments institutionalized the process of regular elections at the local government level and opened up spaces for direct citizen participation in rural India through the creation of the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha is now a regular presence in India's 2 million villages, making it arguably the largest deliberative democratic institution of its kind worldwide.[8] The amendments also invited citizens to participate in planning and decision making processes by entrusting Gram Panchayats (local governments at the village level) with the responsibility to make plans for economic and social justice, in consultation with the Gram Sabha local communities.

The push towards decentralized, local government reform was accompanied by a parallel movement that privileged another kind of decentralization—single purpose user-groups—where citizens can plan, implement, and on occasion, monitor service delivery.[9] User groups are a now common feature in all the major centrally sponsored schemes and, as a result, the local institutional landscape is dotted with village education committees, village water and sanitation committees, health committees, and so forth.[10] While exact estimates are hard to come by, it would be fair to assume that a single village in the country would have at least 10 different user groups entrusted with varying degrees of responsibility. User groups stand in sharp contrast to the multi-purpose local governments created through the Constitutional Amendments. Membership in groups is usually through nominations based on scheme specific guidelines. Usually, they do not have any formal linkages with elected local governments and are created and managed exclusively through sector specific line departments.

These, first generation, decentralized reforms offered citizens a "well behaved" space for participation—one that maintained an arm's length distance between citizens and the state. Citizens were invited to participate and even monitor state operations but the nature and form of these spaces limited citizens' roles to ex ante consultations, administration, and implementation functions. In some cases, like the Gram Sabha, invitations were extended to monitor processes but without the tools and mechanisms with which to do so. Participation, in these early days, was distinctly apolitical in that it was circumscribed to inputs regarding implementation of specific government projects in which citizens engaged rather than confronted or demanded accountability from the state.[11] These reforms thus

encouraged a responsive state but spaces for demanding answerability and accountability, remained elusive.

Organized civic activism in India changed this. In the 1990s, civil society began to experiment with innovative tools and mechanisms through which citizens quite literally, inserted themselves into the everyday functions of the state, scrutinizing them and demanding accountability. Drawing partly on the Indian experience, a new set of writings emerged that emphasized a more radical conceptualization of state-society relationships, and argued that accountability is best sought when citizens are involved not just in decision making but also in oversight mechanisms within the state. Goetz and Jenkins refer to this as a "new accountability agenda" where "vertical" actors carry out interstate horizontal functions.[12] They called this "hybrid" or "diagonal" accountability. In India, largely as a consequence of this activism, the state has recently undertaken two significant reforms to invite citizens into greater participation of once closed off horizontal oversight functions.

The first of these reforms was the passage of the Right to Information Act (RTI) in 2005. The notion of the RTI was pioneered by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in the early 1990s through a movement that pushed the frontiers of the notion of access to information to offer a radical interpretation of access to information as a "right" that is fundamental to citizens right to participate in governance processes.[13]

The credibility of the idea and public pressure that it generated resulted in the passage of a national Act. The RTI empowers citizens with the ability to request any information held by the government. Moreover, all government departments are required to open up their operations to scrutiny through voluntary disclosures. While the Act may not be considered an invited space in the traditional sense, it finds space in this discussion because by providing citizens with an instrument, it has opened up new avenues and spaces for citizens to scrutinize its operations and, therefore, participate in its affairs.

But, information is a mere instrument. Once information is accessed, the question of how this is used for mobilizing citizens to place accountability demands on the state becomes central. Through its activism, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan experimented with the concept of social audits—a process where ordinary citizens are turned into auditors and obtain access to state documents such as

muster rolls (attendance registers for public works programs), and audit these documents in order to expose malfeasance. The audits are followed by a *Jan Sunwai,* a public hearing where details of official records are read out to an assembly of people. At the hearing, victims of fraudulent practice give testimonies and government officials and politicians are given an opportunity to respond to these testimonials.[14]

The social audit is powerful because it completes the accountability loop. The RTI by virtue of placing information in the public domain creates the opportunity for public scrutiny and questioning. Drawing on this information, the social audit through public hearings, offers a mechanism for citizens to debate information and this in turn can create pressures on public officials to respond to charges of malfeasance. Thus, it pushes one critical element of accountability that of ensuring answerability.

In recent years, the central government has taken steps to institutionalize spaces for the conduct of social audits in some of its larger service delivery programs. The most radical articulation is in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (a national law that guarantees every citizen of rural India 100 days of work) that mandates the regular conduct of social audits. In so doing, the Act gives the process legal sanction. This legal right has acted as a catalyst for some state governments to experiment and innovate with institutionalizing social audits into the fabric of implementing the guarantee program. Andhra Pradesh is now a pioneer and has created a system where the government, through village level volunteers, undertakes regular audits to monitor the program. On average, 100 audits are conducted every month, with expenditures ranging between Rs. 7t. To institutionalize the process, the Andhra Government has set up a society to train citizens to conduct the audits. Consequent to the success of audits in National Rural Employment Guarantee program, other line departments in the state are beginning to consider models for incorporating such audits into their implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

The Andhra model is particularly unique because it marks the first time that the state has, willingly and without much external pressure (the movement for social auditing have their base in Rajasthan and had little influence in the state of Andhra Pradesh), opened itself up to scrutiny and done so by proactively mobilizing citizens to monitor its activities (a role traditionally played by civil society). In doing so it

marks the beginnings of a newer and perhaps even more radical conceptualization of hybrid accountability.

As this brief review indicates, from Gram Sabhas to user groups, from consultation to planning, budgeting and monitoring from Right To Information to social audits, the Indian state has slowly but surely begun to open itself up to often radical spaces for participation. The strategic emphasis of these different spaces varies reflecting traces of different conceptualizations of participation. In some cases, participation is limited to consultations and co-management. In others, participation is extended to institutionalized involvement in the state's deliberative decision making processes through involvement in local government activities. And, in yet others, citizens have been invited to insert themselves more directly in the everyday operations of the state's horizontal institutions of oversight, confront it, and exact direct accountability from it.

Invited Spaces in Practice: Do They Actually Work? And Do They Enhance Accountability? Lessons From the Indian Experience

Invited Spaces in Practice: Implementation Challenges
This profusion and diversity of invited spaces gives rise to the obvious question of how they work in practice-how are these spaces used, if they are used at all? Who participates? And to what effect?

Finding a definitive answer to these questions is challenging because of the diversity of spaces and the complexity of the notion of participation itself. Participatory approaches have been widely criticized for making naïve assumptions about communities and collective action by overlooking the complexities of local power relations—a result of deeply entrenched social inequities—and the attendant risks and opportunity costs that participation entails, especially for the poor and the marginalized.[15] More pessimistic assessments about invited spaces argue that power asymmetries and social exclusion have meant that these spaces have served to create newer avenues for capture of the state by local elites at the cost of the poor.

Another set of concerns stems from the fact that these are top-down, state-sponsored spaces, and as such are bound by norms laid down by the state. Cornwall argues that their purpose, mandate, and

remit tend to be circumscribed by the agendas of implementing agencies that are rarely open to negotiation. These framings affect how issues come to be debated and how perspectives of different participants come to be viewed.[16] Critics and supporters have also pointed out that participation, in whatever shape or form, is no panacea, and simply *creating* invited spaces, is not by itself enough to bring about "real" participation and accountability.

Yet, there are also assessments that point to more positive outcomes some of which we discuss later in the article.[17] What these critiques make clear is that participation is a complex and contestable concept. Consequently, whether or not participatory spaces are effective remains an open question for social science. Much more micro-level research is needed to understand questions of who participates and why, which forms of participation work and in which context and perhaps most crucially, how participation affects service delivery and accountability. In recent years, some empirical evidence is beginning to emerge that attempts to answer some of these questions and distil lessons. In what follows, we draw on some of this evidence as well as new research to understand whether India's experience with participatory reforms can contribute to understandings of participatory reforms more generally as well as offer lessons for strengthening the efficacy of participatory reforms, specifically, in the Indian context. We focus on two macro questions: first are these spaces being used? And second, to what effect?

Are participatory spaces being used? To answer this question, we need to examine the implementation story. It is widely acknowledged that that participatory reform measures have been implemented unevenly across the country and, perhaps as a consequence, invitations to participate have met with a lukewarm response from citizens. Gram Sabhas, are rarely held and when they are, participation is weak. For instance, in 2002–03, as many as 75 percent of Gram Sabhas in the state of Himachal Pradesh had to be adjourned for lack of a quorum—a quorum requires just 10 percent attendance.[18] A 2005 study by Besley et al. from more than 4000 households across South India found that a quarter of Gram Panchayats had not even held a single Gram Sabha while a mere 20 percent of households had ever attended a Gram Sabha.[19] Crook and Sverisson in their study report on a survey undertaken by Crook and Manor on Gram Sabha participation in Karnataka to argue that participation levels are disappointingly low. Interestingly, they

found that village meetings worked very well in the first two years but with time the number of meetings held, the number of villages where meetings were held and number of people that attended gradually declined to a point where they were virtually abandoned.[20]

Even when Gram Sabha's are held, whether they are spaces for asserting real participation given the deep seated social hierarchies in which they are embedded is an open question.[21] Many authors argue that the Gram Sabha has served to strengthen hierarchies of power: caste, class, and gender. Some go so far as to suggest that decision making within the Gram Sabha is in fact reflective of local power relations.[22] Even more positive assessments of the Gram Sabha reflect on this issue. Rao and Sanyal state, "the silences and absences are as revealing of the nature of participation as those who speak."[23]

There are, of course, some important exceptions; Kerala being the most significant. A 2003 study by Heller and Chaudhuri reports that in the first two years of the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning (the campaign that initiated the process of democratic decentralization in the state by devolving up to 40 percent of government plan funds to Panchayats) as many as 1.8 million people attended planning Gram Sabha's. Importantly, the social composition of the Gram Sabha's was quite inclusionary with women representing 41 percent of participants by the second year. They also point to over-representation from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities.[24] Of course, Kerala is an exception, but even so, the fact that people participate and do so in large numbers offers important lessons about why people participate and the effectiveness of participation for accountability and we come back to these later in the article.

The fact that participatory spaces are rarely used is closely linked to the issue of information and awareness. A recent micro study of Village Education Committees created through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (a centrally sponsored scheme for elementary education) in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, Banerjee et al. offers some insights in to the extent to which information constraints affect real participation. The study found that 92 percent of the sample claimed that they were unaware of the existence of such a committee. Of those that claimed that such a committee does exist, less than 3 percent could name at least one of the actual members of the Village Education Committee.[25] These micro level findings are supported by a country wide rapid assessment undertaken by the Accountability Initiative, a New Delhi based

research group, in 2009 that found that committees are more or less defunct. The survey found that even if committee members are aware of their membership, knowledge of roles and responsibilities is low and most members had not even visited the school.[26] Interestingly, in the case of Jaunpur, even after a concerted information campaign, a randomized evaluation conducted by Banerjee et al. found that participation levels did not improve.[27]

Importantly, access to information is linked to the broader point of who participates. Information is often held by elites within these committees who use it to capture decision making processes. A classic example is in the case of information on resource availability in school level committees where often, the head master and Panchayat president are the only members that have access to relevant information. This severely compromises the ability of the non elite to participate effectively.

Experience with implementation of the newer instruments such as the Right to Information and social auditing present a similar uneven picture. While Right to Information applications are rising continuously, and according to a recently completed study across 10 States in India, by the Right to Information Assessment and Analysis Group (RAAG), a citizens' initiative to analyze the RTI, information is provided in about 50–60 percent cases, awareness remains a serious problem. According to the study, only 45 percent respondents in urban areas—state capitals and Delhi—had heard about the RTI. Not surprisingly, in rural areas this number drops significantly. A total of 400 focus groups consisting of about 20 (average) participants were conducted across 240 villages in sample states. Among the respondents, a mere 20 percent had heard of the RTI and far fewer had used it.[28]

In the case of social audits, anecdotal evidence from around the country suggests that awareness of social audits is very low. Citizens rarely report having participated in them and most state governments, even in the context of implementing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, where social audits are enshrined in the law, have failed to ensure their conduct. There are of course important exceptions, in particular, as mentioned before, the Government of Andhra Pradesh where regular audits are being conducted. The public hearings that follow the audits attract citizens in large numbers; typically, these meetings are attended by **five** to **six hundred** citizens, most of whom are beneficiaries of the NREGA.

Despite the implementation challenges, there are pockets across the country—such as Kerala and Andhra Pradesh—where governments are actively working towards strengthening invited spaces and citizens are responding to these invitations. Understanding how these spaces are used, and the effects they have are crucial because it offers lessons both for the broader discourse on participation but also for the more specific policy concern of strengthening existent spaces to ensure greater accountability of government and effective delivery of services.

Understanding Effectiveness: Can Invited Spaces Strengthen Accountability?

Before answering this question, some important caveats are presented. First, the range, diversity, and variations of experience with invited spaces in India raises two crucial questions. First, there is the question of who actually participates and why? And second, which forms of participation work in which kinds of spaces and contexts? Critical as these questions are, research on these issues remains relatively thin. The question that this article focuses is on is the larger one of effectiveness. What happens when people participate in large numbers? And, does this participation lend itself to pushing for greater accountability?

Second, India's experiment with democratic decentralization (local governance) reforms has been the subject of much recent research. This research tells an important story—that when used, decentralized invited spaces can and do promote participation, responsiveness, and accountability as evidenced through improved outcomes and greater access to services. For instance, Heller et al.'s analysis of the people's campaign in Kerala indicates that decentralization is associated with improved development outcomes.[29] Besley et al.'s study of Gram Sabhas indicates that participation in Gram Sabhas is associated with a better chance of the landless, illiterate, and SC/ST's obtaining Below Poverty Line and Ration cards—probability of an 8–10 percent increase.[30] In another study in West Bengal, Bardhan et al. found that high rates of participation in Gram Sabha's are associated with greater accountability of local officials to communities, low level capture by elites and greater targeting at the local level.[31]

More recently, Rao and Sanyal undertook a study of Gram Sabhas in four states in Southern India. Their work tells a fascinating story of how citizens use the Gram Sabha as a space to discuss routine problems, access

public goods and on occasion challenge local hierarchies and decisions. They offer an important insight in to the role that Gram Sabha's play in providing a space for the poor to exercise citizenship. As is well established, in the absence of a politics of accountability, citizen-state relations in rural India are embedded in relationships of patronage or "gifts" from the state rather than in the framework of rights and responsibilities. The Gram Sabha provides the rural poor with a discursive space for the groups and individuals to stake their claim on the "gifts" of the state. Much of the discussion during the Gram Sabha centres on access to public goods and occasionally deeply entrenched social hierarchies are questioned and challenged. In so doing, it "briefly releases people from primordial inequality traps and allows them the freedom to speak." For Rao and Sanyal, through the provision of a space where opinions can be voiced, the Gram Sabha can create the "capacity to engage" and this, in the long term, can help citizens gain equal access to social, cultural and political capital.[32]

Drawing on the experience of decentralized planning in Kerala, Patrick Heller et al. make a similar argument. Through assessments of Indian democracy, they argue that decentralization reform marked the first step towards strengthening associational life by opening up institutional spaces for participation at the local level. In India, they point out, despite widespread participation in elections, the institutional space for democratic engagement, and the exercise of local citizenship, outside of voting, is in fact extremely limited. This is primarily a consequence of pervasive social inequalities that act as barriers to citizen—state engagement. Chibber characterizes Indian democracy as a 'democracy without associations." Chatterjee goes a step further to argue that civil society as a space for engagement with the state is dominated by the elite leaving out the rest India.[33] It is in this context that decentralization reforms acquire their significance. For Heller et al., the very fact of creating local governments, in the Indian context, "is tantamount to expanding the association field and more specifically to increasing the opportunities and effects of direct citizen participation in government."[34] An analysis of the effectiveness of the People's Campaign substantiates this argument. For instance, they found that the number of women's self help groups expanded substantially during the campaign as did the number of "ordinary citizens" that asked questions of the government.

When examining the extent to which invited spaces have strengthened citizenship, it is also important to look at the relationship between

these new spaces and political society. In particular, the questions to consider are whether these new spaces are throwing up new forms of leadership, how these spaces interact with mainstream political parties, and whether they can challenge the role of political parties in mediating between citizens and the government, particularly in accessing services. This is a relatively under-researched area. There is some evidence from the work of Veron et al. that, in fact, new participatory forms of development, including the Gram Sabha's, have not yet re-drawn the boundaries of state-society relations and political society continues to mediate the agency of the poor to access entitlements from the state. They go on to argue that political parties are crucial as agents of mobilization and that the exclusive apolitical focus on invited spaces is, in fact, misplaced.[35] This question needs to be re-examined in the changing policy context of India, which is witnessing the emergence rights based, (all of which emphasize a role for the Gram Sabha) approaches to public service provision such as the NREGA and, more recently, the Right to Education. More research is needed to examine whether the invocation of the language of rights has resulted in a shift in this dynamic.

As is evident from this brief review, research on the functioning of local government led invited spaces is fairly well known and accepted, both in policy and academic spaces. The current analysis contributes to this body of work by focusing on one instance of the newer invited spaces—social audits conducted by government, which because they are relatively new, have received scant attention. Given that these spaces are relatively nascent, it does not examine the question of their interaction with political society or the role that these can play in strengthening citizenship, although the latter is implicit in the discussions.

To return to the question under consideration: does participation in result in greater accountability? In 2007, the World Bank, in partnership with the Government of Andhra Pradesh, conducted a study on the effectiveness of implementing regular social audits.[36] The overall objective of the study was to assess the efficacy of social audits as an accountability mechanism. At the time of the study, the audit process was under a year old; hence, it was difficult to study larger questions of accountability such as effects of audits on corruption, malpractice and service delivery outcomes as these would probably take a much longer time to emerge. The study focused on examining the effectiveness of audits across three parameters of awareness, implementation process and grievance redressal, all of which are cruial to the process of establishing

an accountable system. In this sense this study does not offer any definitive answers, but it does offer indicators of the potential of social audits and the link between these audits and accountability.

Awareness, implementation and grievance redressal form the core of an accountable system. What citizens know and the information they have available to them is a prerequisite to citizens asking questioning and, thereby, checking the misuse of power. Information is thus crucial to the effective exercise of citizenship. But how is information used for accountability? The simplest test is whether access to information can strengthen implementation process both by ensuring that local voice is heard and that *dejure* implementation complies with norms and guidelines laid down in programs. As is well known, corruption is only one of the many manifestations of weak accountability structures in India's public service delivery systems. Poor and inefficient implementation is the other. This arises from the fact that program delivery at the front line is rarely monitored; lack of monitoring skews incentives for performance at the frontline. Studying the effects of regular citizens' monitoring through the social audit process is thus an important indicator of the extent to which audits can contribute to accountability.

And finally, grievance redressal—state responses to citizen grievances. Enforceability, the ability of the state to take action and ensure that actions have consequences, is the core meaning of accountability. The extent to which audits can, through exposing deficiencies of the state, ensure grievance redressal is thus an important indicator of its ability to enhance accountability.

The study surveyed 840 laborers across three districts (Cuddapah, Khamam, and Medak) in the state asking the same set of questions to the same laborers thrice over a seven month period: round one before the social audit to establish a baseline, round two, one month after the social audit to determine the immediate effect of exposure to a social audit and round three, six months later to assess how the effects change over time.

In addition, a set of surveys were administered to 180 laborers one week after the social audit to gauge laborer perceptions on the social audit process.[37]

The Effects of Social Audits: Awareness
To assess the effect of social audits on awareness levels, the study asked laborers whether they had heard of the National Rural

Employment Guarantee Act and whether they were aware of its specific components.

When asked "Have you heard of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act," only 39 percent answered positively in round one, before the social audit. This rose to a dramatic 98 percent in round two and stayed at 98 percent in round three, six months later. More significant are the responses on specific elements of the scheme. For instance, only 31 percent respondents were aware that the Act offers a 100 day guarantee before the social audit. This shot up to 88 percent in round two and went up to 99 percent in round three. In round one, 30 percent respondents were aware that machines were forbidden in the program before the social audit. This increased to 88 percent and 99 percent in rounds two and three, respectively; 25 percent were aware that the Act is a demand driven process before the social audit. This went up to 74 percent after the social audit and increased to 99 percent in round three of the survey.

Interestingly, a large number of those that had hear about NREGA is round were from General Castes. In round two and three, the substantive increase in information was largely found among SC/STs and women. Interestingly, by round three more General Castes reported accurate answers on the different elements of NREGA than others.

This data is significant as it reflects the critical role that social audits, and for that matter, any intensive external intervention can play in disseminating information and ensuring that it reaches those who need it. During the audit, teams spend a minimum of three to four days in the villages interacting with beneficiaries and discussing various aspects of the scheme with them. At the end of this process, village meetings are organized where information concerning the program and details of its implementation are shared with the village. Through this process, critical information is shared and, as this data suggests, this knowledge remains with the villagers long after the audit teams have gone. This data has important implications for efforts on strengthening the efficacy of invites spaces more generally. It also raises some questions about sustainability which we discuss later.

The Effects of Social Audits: Implementation Processes
What does access to information achieve? Can it have a significant impact on the efficacy of program implementation? Moreover, does regular monitoring through social audit lead to mid course corrections?

To answer these questions, in each round, laborers were asked specific questions concerning work site management, muster roll (beneficiary attendance register) maintenance, worksite facilities and payment processes. The results were less dramatic but significant. For instance, the study found that entries in job cards—a card held by all laborers into which details of works undertaken and payments made are expected to be noted—increased from 39 percent in round one to 99 percent in round three indicating that there is some follow up to the social audit in key management areas.

Some improvements were also found in worksite facilities. The law mandates that all worksites provide certain facilities such as drinking water, shade, and a crèche for children. Post the social audit, worksite facilities improved. Drinking water availability went up from 79 percent in round one to 83 percent and 95 percent in rounds two and three respectively. The presence of first aid facilities at work sites rose from 41 percent in round one to 52 percent in round two and 83 percent in round three. The provision of facilities for shade at the worksites improved from 16 percent to 40 percent in round three.

Interestingly, there was a 10 percent jump between round one and round three in people's perceptions of delays in wage payments. This could be for two reasons, one because these delays, indeed, did increase but this change in perception could also be a response to the fact that a larger number of laborers were now aware that payments had to be made within 15 days of work completion.

The Effects of Social Audits: Grievance Redressal
To assess whether social audits are perceived as a useful mechanism for resolving petty grievances, the study measured laborer perceptions of the social audit process. Study results show that 88 percent of those who had participated in the social audit said that grievances were raised during the audit process. Of these, as many as 84 percent said that these were resolved. When asked if they felt that the social audit was an effective mechanism to resolve grievances, as many as 82 percent laborers replied in the affirmative. This is corroborates data collected by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. In 2008, official statistics reported that in over 500 local levels, contract staff had been dismissed. Moreover, there are instances where embezzled funds have been returned according to available sources, by November 2007,

Rs. 60 Lakh worth of embezzled funds were returned at different public meetings.[38]

Do laborers find social audits a useful exercise? 90 percent respondents said the social audits are a desirable task. Of these, 94 percent said that the social audits ought to be conducted on a regular basis and at the end of round three, 95 percent respondents said that they were ready to conduct a social audit on their own. These findings are particularly significant because one month after the social audit, 87 percent respondents said that they would not conduct a social audit on their own. The study argues that the reason for this dramatic change in perception from round one to round three lies in the fact that within a few months of the audit being completed, the state government instituted a process of regular follow up where social auditors were required to go back to interact with social audit participants and monitor action taken on audit recommendations. Consequently, laborers are assured on feedback, which in turn built citizen trust in the process and resulted in this change in perception.

In sum what this analysis suggests is, when implemented regularly, social audits appear to have a dramatic impact on citizen awareness—the first step to strengthening their capabilities to actively engage with government; some impact on implementation suggests that monitoring can create pressures and incentives for performance and, lastly, a significant effect on resolving petty grievances associated with corruption and poor implementation. If these are taken as appropriate indicators of accountability, it would be fair to argue that, when conducted regularly, social audits do have the ability to enhance accountability or at least ensure that the features of an accountable system are in place.

The link between information and implementation needs a slight nuance. A series of recent surveys by Shankar et al. on the NREGA in three states, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, throw some interesting light on the relationship between information, participation, corruption, and capture.[39] The studies found, somewhat unsurprisingly, that access to information plays a crucial role in determining who participate in public meetings and accessing the program. So, while social audits are a useful mechanism for spreading information at the time of their conduct and, therefore, perhaps ensures participation in the forums or public hearings, the question of who participates, and the effects of non-participation particularly among the poorest needs further exploration.[40] More

interestingly, through an ethnographic study, Shankar et al. found that access to information in states like Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, among the non-poor resulted in the non-poor misusing the program and, therefore, increasing corruption over time. This analysis indicates that even in social audits, who participates matters and lack of information can result in exclusion of the poor indicating that an awareness generation mechanism about social audits and what they are, are perhaps an essential pre-requisite to ensuring that they result in inclusive partipation and reduction of malpractice.

The findings on grievance redressal and its effects on people's interest and willingness to participate in conducting social audits are extremely important, especially when we compare them with another recent study of the effects of participation by Banerjee et al. referred to earlier. The study examined the impact of an information campaign and training program on Village Education Committees in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh and found no substantial improvement in people's participation in the everyday activities of the committees. The study offers several reasons for this, including the efficacy of participation in large groups, and whether the Village Education Committee would succeed or not which influenced their decision in participating in the Committee.[41] To an extent, the social audit experience corroborates this latter point. People need to recognize the efficacy of participation. This influences their decisions to participate in invited spaces. The state sponsored social audit has two features that help overcome this problem. The first is its regularity (even though social audits had only been conducted once during the study period, regular follow up acted as a mini social audits) and the second, immediate, tangible grievance redressal. The changed perception towards social audits indicates that when citizens saw that issues got resolved and there was follow up, there interest levels and willingness to participate immediately shot up. Whether this can be sustained, is still to be seen. Arguably, Shankar et al.'s findings indicate that once the social audits were taken to scale (social audits started in 13 districts in the state and were later expanded to the entire state), grievance redressal and follow up has, in fact, not been as strong allowing the non-poor to misuse information, allowing the non-poor to benefit at the expense of the poor. This fact has been reiterated by government and is an important indicator of the dangers of going to scale.

Strengthening Invited Spaces: Lessons From Experience

As this review of India's invited spaces suggests, while the pace of reforms has been slow and uneven, when these spaces have been created in earnest, they have been effective and do contain within them the potential to strengthen accountability in service delivery. India's experience also reflects some of the dilemmas and complexities associated with participatory approaches. People do not always respond to invitations from the state and when they do, the nature of these responses and the forms they take can vary considerably. But there are some important, general lessons that can be drawn from the success stories and, in particular, from the experience of the regular conduct of social audits in Andhra Pradesh. In this section, we analyze these lessons with the objective of identifying practical recommendations on how invited spaces can be strengthened.

First and foremost, these experiences reiterate the well known truth that enhancing meaningful participation requires more than just inviting citizens. For citizens to partake of available spaces and participate in a meaningful way, invited spaces need to be nurtured. Specifically, the Andhra experience demonstrates, nurturing requires that the link between information (awareness), implementation, and grievance redressal is strengthened. People need to have access to information on the basis of which they can mobilize and participate. Moreover, citizens need to understand how these invited spaces work—the norms, processes that govern them. And finally, they need to trust the efficacy of their participation in these spaces. In essence the link between information/awareness, implementation, and grievance redressal needs to be well formed to ensure effective participation.

Of course, that invited spaces need an activist government to be meaningful is perhaps self evident, the lesson that needs to be drawn from these experiences is that of the "how to"—when a government begins to take on an activist role, what are the instruments it has available to it to strengthen participation? In other words, what are the practical steps that an activist government can take to strengthen invited spaces?

To begin with, governments need to build awareness and information access for citizens. Social audits, as the Andhra experience suggest is one mechanism by which this can be done. Crucially, the social audit process holds important lessons on "how to" disseminate information. As mentioned, in the social audit model, social auditors

spend up to three to four days in villages and in this process spread awareness about citizen entitlements under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Intensive interventions, where community mobilizers spend a few days in villages sharing information can, thus, significantly improve information access. To facilitate these interventions governments could tie up with civil society organizations to play the role of community mobilizers. Andhra's social audit model of linking with civil society activists is one example of how these linkages can be established.

However, there is also a need for mobilization prior to the social audit so as to broad base participation in efforts like social audits. After all, inclusiveness is crucial to determining the effectiveness of invited spaces.

The RTI provides the institutional framework that can address some of these information gaps. Especially Section 4 of the RTI Act mandates that the governments proactively report information *relevant* to the public, including details on budgets, subsidies, key policy decisions, functions, duties and so on. Despite the fact that this is a mandatory requirement, few public authorities have followed it in the earnest—according to the RAAG study a mere 25 percent of government departments are complying with section 4. Further, even when documents are disclosed, they remain inaccessible because government records are maintained in a manner that is incomprehensible to the average citizen. For information to be effective, reports need to be de-mystified, using non-technical language so that they are relevant to citizens. At the moment, this is not being done effectively.

For information to be meaningful to citizens and lend itself towards accountability, steps can be taken to improve mechanisms for reporting information. Stricter adherence to the requirements under the RTI Act could address the information problems substantially. Some steps to strengthening Section 4 of the RTI could include: making it mandatory for all government departments to appoint a public information officer with the exclusive charge of ensuring compliance with section 4 norms; creating a body of best practice on mechanisms for disclosure; and incentivizing the system by instituting awards for best practice on section 4 compliance.

Next, there is the issue of effective grievance redressal. As we have seen through the social audit experience, for citizens to participate they need to believe in the efficacy of their own actions on service

delivery outcomes. Moreover, grievance redressal can protect against the non-poor using information for gain. Building functional grievance redressal systems is, therefore, crucial. There are several ways in which this can be achieved. One option is through the creation of district level ombudsman that are empowered with the capacity to undertake investigations against errant officials. This model is currently being experimented with in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.[42] Civil society organizations have also been experimenting with different models for grievance redressal that the state can adopt, and here to there are best practice examples that an activist government can draw on. One model is that of using the Lok Adalats—a quasi judicial body empowered to resolve petty grievances outside the formal court system—to resolve grievances related to service delivery, particularly in the current environment where many service delivery programs are being provided through a rights based, legal framework. [43]

The need to see tangible outcomes points to another reason why citizens have chosen not to participate in invited spaces—inadequate devolution. As has been mentioned, local government reforms have been very uneven across the country and with the few exceptions of Kerala and Karnataka state governments have been hesitant to devolve funds and powers to them. In the absence of real powers, local governments are unable to perform. Where then are the incentives for citizens to participate? Even if financial resources are devolved, the nature of this devolution, the fact that funds usually arrive at the local level tied to very specific guidelines with minimum flexibility and lack of predictability of funds flows make real planning an impossible task. If, as the social audit grievance redressal model seems to indicate, outcomes leads to participation, an activist government will need to take steps to address these flaws in fund flows and ensure that local institutions are truly empowered.

In practical terms, this would involve the following steps. First, there is a need to undertake a systematic activity mapping of the roles and responsibilities of the different tiers of government, based on first principles of public finance and accountability. This then becomes the basis of determining the specific activities and responsibilities that local government ought to undertake. Next, funds must follow functions so that local government can fulfill their mandate. Transfers of funds to local governments could be improved in the

following ways. First, funds flows should move from the current schematic (program based, tied funding) to a system where funds are bundled together along a specific thematic (issue based, untied funding) structure so that local governments can chose to allocate funds according to their specific needs and priorities. Second, to ensure higher flexibility at the local level, funds should be transferred as block, untied grants rather than the current structure where funds arrive at the local level tied to specific expenditure norms and guide-lines. If these reforms are undertaken, local governments will have a far wider mandate for development and greater discretion over expenditure choices, which in turn would be more reflective of local needs and priorities than in the current structure. This could go a long way in creating incentives for greater local participation.

Lastly, it is also important to reflect on some of the dangers of invited spaces. The Andhra experience holds some crucial lessons in this regard. As has been mentioned, when the Andhra experiment was taken to scale in 2008–09, it effectiveness began to weaken. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the audits face problems like capture by the non-poor, weak follow up and on occasion co-option of the social auditors by local elite. In fact, the government has in the last year, taken action against many social auditors! The Andhra experiment, while it remains a good example of how invited spaces ought to func-tion, is also an illustration of what can go wrong with invited spaces, particularly as they go to scale. The interesting thing with Andhra is that the government is actively and continually taking steps to address these challenges of scale. Whether they will be successful remains to be seen.

There are also political challenges. Thus far, Andhra Pradesh has had the political backing of a supportive chief minister and senior administra-tion. This is unusual. In most states in India, political economy challenges have been the primary factor that has prevented the institutionalization of social audits. Rajasthan is an interesting example. In 2009, consequent to civil society pressure, the Government of Rajasthan announced the cre-ation of a social audit cell similar to the Andhra model. This move was met with severe resistance from local level politicians, particularly at the Panchayat level and, eventually, the state government succumbed to this pressure and stalled the move. The challenge for invited spaces like social audits lies therefore, in addressing this question of political will and over-coming the constraints it presents. This requires further research.

Concluding Thoughts

Amid the diversity and complexity of India's invited spaces runs one common thread-effective participation calls for an activist government, one that involves itself at every stage from providing information, creating incentives, to facilitation, to follow-up action and grievance redressal. But this raises an important question: why should a government willingly create a "countervailing power"? What incentives does the government have? Clearly, some states respond to opportunities created through participatory spaces but we know very little about why they do so. Is it because of reform champions? Is it because of politics? Or, are there some other factors? There are strikingly few accounts of how and why some government chose to become activists while others do not. Much more research needs to done to understand these very crucial questions.

More understanding is also required about the long term effects of institutionalized participation works. Clearly, it works, as we saw in Andhra Pradesh and with the experience of implementing decentralized reform in some states. But, when does it get reduced to rhetoric and ritual? Or does it get routinized? And, how can states deal with these challenges?

And finally, are we over romanticizing participation? There is no doubt that participation in itself is an essential component of a well functioning, democratic society—one that is accountable to its citizens and the exercise of citizenship. But in this rush to place the onus of exacting accountability from the state on citizens, do we also run the risk of overburdening them? And what of the state? Where does the state's responsibility for accountability lie?

These questions may well not have any cut and dried answers. But, as the participatory discourse gains greater and greater legitimacy in current conceptualizations of accountability, it is important that these questions are raised and concerns highlighted. After all, as critiques of participation make clear, invited spaces are no panacea.

1. Andrea Cornwall, "Making Spaces, Changing Places: Situating Participation in Development," *IDS Working Paper*, No. 170 (2002) and Karen Brock, Andrea Cornwall, and

John Gaventa, "Power, knowledge and political spaces in the framing of poverty policy," *IDS Working Paper*, No. 143 (2002).

2. This section draws on a larger study that analyzes the evolution of accountability debates and the role of citizens within it. This section is a narrower interpretation that focuses specifically on state sponsored, invited spaces. For a comprehensive review of account-ability debates and citizen participation see Bala Posani and Yamini Aiyar, "State of accountability: Evolution, practice and emerging questions in public accountability in India," *AI, Working Paper* Vol. 1, No.2, (2009), www.accountabilityindia.org.

3. See for instance, Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Co-production, Synergy, and Development," *World Development* Vol. 24, No. 6 (1996), pp. 1073–88; Judith Tendler, *Good government in the tropics*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

4. Peter Evans, "'Introduction: development strategies across the public–private divide," *World Development* Vol. 24 No. 6, (1996) pp. 1033–1037.

5. Harry Blair, "Participation and Accountability and the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries," *World Development* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2000), pp. 21–39.

6. Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, "From User and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy," *IDS Working Paper*, No. 127, (2001).

7. John Gaventa, "Strengthening Participatory Approaches to Local Governance: Learning the Lessons from Abroad," *National Civic Review*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (2004). Accessible from http://www.ncl.org. See also Cornwall and Gaventa, "From User and Choosers" and Cornwall "Making Spaces, Changing places."

8. Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal, "Dignity through Discourse: Poverty and the Culture of Deliberation in Indian Village Democracies," *World Bank Research Working Paper*, No. 4924, (2009). Accessible from http://www.worldbank.org.

9. It is important to note that this is part of a world- wide trend. For a comprehensive review and analysis see James Manor, "A Potentially Damaging Second Wave of Decentralization," *European Journal of Development Research* Vol. 16, No. 1 (2004), pp. 184–203. Accessible from http://www.wri.org.

10. Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) are special purpose fiscal transfers from the Central government to States and are primarily used for social sector schemes. Constitutionally social sector programs lie in the domain of the state. However, since the mid 1970s and more rapidly in the late 1990s continuing to the present, the Government of India (or national/central government as it is often referred to) has come to play a greater role in service delivery. CSS are the primary instrument through which the center funds its social sector programs. These are now the largest funding vehicle for social sector programs in the country.

11. John Ackerman, "Co-Governance for Accountability: Beyond 'Exit' and 'Voice'," *World Development* Vol. 32, No. 3 (2004), pp.447–63.

12. Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, "Hybrid Forms of Accountability: Citizen Engagement in Institutions of Public Oversight in India," *Public Management Review* Vol. 3, No.3 (2001), pp. 363–84.

13. For a comprehensive review of the emergence of the Right to Information Movement see Ann Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, "Accounts and Accountability: Theoretical Implications of the Right to Information Movement in India," *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 3 (1999), pp.603–22.

14. For more details on the evolution of the social audit process, see Goetz and Jenkins, "Hybrid Accountability."

15. See, for instance, Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari "The case for Participation as Tyranny" in Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (Zed Books: London, 2000).

16. Andrea Cornwall, "Making spaces, changing places."

17. See, for instance, Harry Blair, "Participation and Accountability," Jean Paul Faguet, "Governance from Below: A Theory of Local with Two Empirical Tests," *Political Economy and Public Policy* Series, No. 12, (2009) London School of Economics; and Patrick Heller, K.N. Harilal, and Shubham Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy:

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21. See, for instance, Sanjay Kumar and Stuart Coorbridge, "Programmed to fail? Development project and the politics of participation," *Journal of Development Studies*, No.2 (2002), pp. 73–103

22. David Mosse, "Peoples Knowledge, Participation and Patronage: Operations and Representations in Rural Development," in Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, (Zed Books: London, 2000).

23. Rao and Sanyal, "Dignity through Discourse".

24. Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy."

25. Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Dufflo, Rukmini Banerjee, Rachel Glennester, Stuti Khemani, "Can Information Campaigns Spark Local Participation and Improve Local Outcomes? A Study of Primary Education in Uttar Pradesh, India," *World Bank Policy Research Working Article* 3967 (2006). Accessible from http://www.worldbank.org.

26. Survey results available at www.accountabilityindia.org.

27. Abhijit Banerjee, Rukmini Banerjee, Esther Dufflo, Rachel Glennerster and Stuti Khemani, "Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in India," *World Bank Policy Research Working Article*, No. 4584, (2008). Accessible from http://www.worldbank.org.

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29. Patrick Heller, K.N. Harilal, and Shubham Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy."

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32. Rao and Sanyal, "Dignity through Discourse."

33. Pradeep K. Chibber, *Democracy Without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavages in India* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Habour, 1999) and Partha Chatterjee, "Democracy and the Violence of the State: a Political Negotiation of Death," *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* Vol. No. 2, No. 1, pp. 7–21 in Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy."

34. Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhuri, "Building Local Democracy."

35. Rene Veron, Stuart Coorbridge, Glyn Williams, and Manoj Srivastava, "The Everyday State and Political Society in Eastern India: Structuring Access to the Employment Assurance Scheme," *Journal of Development Studies* Vol. 39, No. 5 (2003), pp. 1–28.

36. For more details see study hhtp://www.rd.ap.gov.in. See also, Yamini Aiyar and Salimah Samji, "Transparency and Accountability in NREGA: A Case Study of Andhra Pradesh," *AI Working Paper Series*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2009). Accessible from hhtp://www.accountabilityindia.org.

37. A note on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: The Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2005 and offers rural citizens a guarantee of 100 days manual labor employment. According to the Act, employment is provided on a demand basis, i.e., citizens wanting to work, can ask for work at the Gram Sabha. If work is not provided within fifteen days of a demand being placed, the state government is obliged to provide citizens with an unemployment allowance. Work is provided for building public assets. The decision on the nature of assets to be created is made by the Gram Panchayat in consultation with the Gram Sabha. To prevent corruption, the Act has built into it various transparency features including the mandatory conduct of social audits. Moreover, contractors and the use of machinery for building assets are banned. Finally, employment must be provided at minimum wages and payment must be made to beneficiaries within fifteen days of completion of work.
38. Karuna Akella and Sowmya Kidambi, "Social Audits in Andhra Pradesh: A process in evolution," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. No 42, No. 7 (2007), pp. 18–9.
39. See, for instance, Shylashri Shankar, Raghav Gaiha, and Raghabendra Jha, "Information and Corruption: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India," *ASARC*, Working Paper, 2010/2 (2010). Accessible from http://www.rspas.anu.edu.au.
40. One caveat, the sample in the study was skewed in favor of SC/ST's and women. While most of the sample did, in fact, participate in the social audits we cannot measure, from this data-set, how their participation compared with that of the non-poor. This question merits greater research.
41. Banerjee, Banerjee, Duflo, Glennerster, and Khemani, "Pitfalls of Participatory Programs."
42. In September 2009, the Government of India issued a Government Order mandating the creation of district level ombudsmen. For details see www.nrega.nic.in.
43. In February 2009, a group of civil society activists organized the country's first ever Lok Adalat for resolving citizen grievances with the National Rural employment Guarantee Act. The Lok Adalat itself came up against many problems but it did, as the organizers themselves suggest hold some promise. For more details see: "Lok Adalat or Joke Adalt," *The Hindu*, February 22, 2009.