

Social Movements and Pro-Poor Social Change Revolution or Reform?

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Social movements deliver pro-poor social change – this is the clear lesson arising from the history of modern capitalism. But social movements are notoriously difficult to define. We see them as networks of individuals and groups, with particular claims and values, who mobilise to demand change in society. And while having a dominant class and ethnic/racial basis, they always reach beyond it. Such movements have pressured governments to adopt democracy, social protection, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and to further social justice. Development agencies are showing a growing interest in the role of social movements. This is unsurprising, given the considerable resource redistribution and new political settlements needed to achieve broad-based poverty reduction.

Poverty, exclusion or justice? The view from social movements

Recent research in Peru and South Africa examines how social movements relate to poverty reduction, both directly and indirectly. We conclude that movements of low-income and disadvantaged citizens rarely see 'being poor' as their main identity. Instead, their struggle is a response to being excluded or treated unjustly and inequitably. In South Africa, issues such as urban land, housing and basic services, have drawn the most movement activism. In Peru, by contrast, issues of rights and livelihood are more prominent, as reflected in mobilisation around ethnicity, extractive industry and human rights.

That said, while poverty is rarely the primary concern or language of social movements, poverty reduction policies and programmes can enable social movements to address their members' interests in ways that ultimately lead to pro-poor social change. Success in this regard depends greatly on movement capacities, the political context, and government responsiveness.

A strategic approach

The experiences of six movements in Peru and South Africa illustrate the diverse and complex strategies and tactics adopted by movements as they explore how to secure the needs and interests of their members, interact with government and reach their goals.

Country	Domain	Focus	Objectives	Strategies and tactics
Peru	Human rights.	Abuses of human rights.	Reparations and public recognition of abuses.	Legal process, public information and debate, lobby.
	Collective consumption (nutrition).	Lack of food, cost of living.	Support for their activities.	Self-help, resource accessing.
	Indigenous land rights.	Dispossession of land.	Legal protection from abuse, consultation, alternative economic models.	Protest, alliances with NGOs and legal defence groups.
South Africa	Basic services.	Lack of access to water.	Consultation, improved access.	Protest, alliances with citizens and public employees.
	Housing.	Lack of access to housing, and housing subsidies.	Tenure security, housing improvements.	Protest, negotiation, coproduction.
	Agricultural production.	Low pay, working conditions, lack of access to farming opportunities.	Support labour grievances, land redistribution.	Emphasis on participatory spaces, research.

Table 1: Social movement; demands on and interactions with the state.

Only a minority of cases address poverty explicitly. Movements tend to address issues that generate poverty and inequality and compromise human rights. It is not so much a "world free from poverty" that motivates their struggles as alternative visions about who should have a right to make decisions.

They challenge policy and everyday assumptions about how decisions are made, and about who defines what their societies mean by inclusion, poverty and the good life. They do this in ways that are often, though not always, socially progressive.

Policy points

- The autonomy and independence of social movements need to be respected. Their greatest contribution is their capacity to contest ideas and reaffirm alternative identities.
- The meaningful inclusion of activists in policy consultation, joint planning, co-management and delivery of state activities benefits the democratic process and improves state effectiveness and accountability.
- The lowest-income and most disadvantaged citizens may not be as active in movements as less disadvantaged citizens: policy processes need to be sensitive to this.

References and resources

Papers and reports from the Social Movements and Poverty project can be found at: www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/socialmovements

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