

Book Review

Neela Mukherjee, *Speaking to Power 27 Voice Tools: Building Bridges for Participatory Learning, Action and Policy Making*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company. 296 pages. Rs. 450.

Development today is seen as not only economic growth but also includes human development. Infact development which does not take people into consideration is said to be development without a soul. It is here that the concerns of the poor and the marginalized become important and need to be attended. Infact policy specifically social policy is all about wellbeing of the people through redistribution of resources. Wellbeing can only happen when the policy makers are in know how of the needs of the deprived and get out of their ivory towers to listen to what the ordinary man has to say. In other words effective policies can only be framed with effective participation of the people for whom the policy is being prepared and thus it becomes important that their voice is heard. The present book is all about the ways of enabling the poor and the ordinary people 'speak to power'.

A book of this kind of coverage is very much desired for social workers, policy makers, and activists, not to forget the academia of professional courses like rural management and social work which need to transmit this knowledge down to the students to create efficient manpower in development sector. Infact the book can be seen as a great service to the development practioners who strive to find effective ways to linking the target group to the policy makers. With a menu of 27 voice tolls spread over 296 pages and eight chapters the practioner can choose the most appropriate tool, experimented in various parts of the world. The author's gender sensitivity is reflected from her inclusion of women as a category who have been marginalized and needs to be heard.

The author skillfully weaves one chapter to another and one tool to another tool to maintain the continuous flow of community voice. A very basic but generally ignored aspect like the key principles for eliciting voice in policy making is well placed in the initial chapters and listening and hearing are given the top priority. The reading becomes interesting as the reader is made to think about pertinent questions like 'whose knowledge counts?'—is it the knowledge of the policy makers alone or the grassroots too. One does get worried realizing that indigenous knowledge which is very rich, important and in abundance with local people, will get lost if not captured by listening to their voices. This is the paradigm shift in the field of development where people's voice, knowledge, participation have gained momentum over the once top down approach. The need for change of attitude and behavior in order to accept the changed paradigm is covered in the book including aspects such as who participates, importance of rapport formation and sharing.

The highlight of the book is the set of 27 voice tools evolved to connect the voice of the grassroots with the policy makers and is divided into Participatory Assessment (PA) and Social

Accountability (SA). The book gives 14 different tools to conduct PA and 13 different tools for SA. The book details out four voice tools from PA, namely-Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), Sustainable Livelihood Assessment (SLA), Integrated Participatory Poverty Assessment (IPPA) and Assessing Governance (AG). Chapati/ Venn diagram as methods for understanding empowerment, ownership, participation etc. has been well brought out through case studies. Chapter 6 is completely devoted to IPPA and discusses in detail the different dimension of human poverty and shows the use of IPPA in capturing causes and solution of human poverty. The chapter studies lives of people by covering various aspects such as well being, asset assessment etc which help in measuring incidence of human poverty or even wellbeing. Citizens report card, citizens voice card, participatory budgeting, family satisfaction survey are among the many tools brought to the knowledge of the reader by the author under SA, a mechanism which refers to tools which the communities and citizens can use to hold government and bureaucracy accountable.

A question that generally arises in one's mind is at what stage the ordinary man can be involved in policy making. The author addresses this aspect in good detail and specifies that there are various levels of participation in which the person can be involved—need assessment stage, planning, action stage, monitoring stage. It is also important to see the breadth of participation—how many men and women are engaged, which groups participate more than the others, active participation would trace who spoke during the session, whose views were not considered and why, did the poor groups have the opportunity to express their dissent etc. The book concludes with a very pertinent chapter which addresses the question of how to institutionalize the community voice at village, district, state, national and international level. The role of an autonomous organization with specific characteristics has been suggested by the author.

A very informative book by Dr. Neela Mukherjee and a must read for everyone who is working in the development area. A minor suggestion is that the author could have also used the term social policy for better representation of the voice aspect that the book covers. An added attraction of the book is the information provided in the boxes that contains illustrations from different countries as explanations to the voice tool which helps the reader to relate with the tool in a global way. An exhaustive reference list has been given at the end of each chapter, along with extensive bibliography for the reader who wishes to make a deeper study.

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