

How To Avoid Seeing Like a State Learning from CSOs

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If a government's policies are planned from a bird's-eye view with insufficient knowledge of local conditions and livelihoods, they can go wrong. Civil society organisations on their part have the capability to act as a link between locals and decision-makers. CSOs are worth listening to because they might just have seen something that the state cannot see.

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Seeing like a state, of course, is a phrase made famous by the Yale anthropologist and political scientist James Scott in his popular 1998 book that carries the phrase as its title (Scott 1998). In the book, Scott describes how “schemes to improve the human condition,” from Tanzania’s Ujamaa villages to the realisation of Le Corbusier’s urban planning theory in Brasilia to projects of agricultural modernisation in the tropics have gone awry. Scott argues that the reason for the failure of these projects was the top-down approach adopted by states with high modernist ideologies, insufficient knowledge of local conditions, and the failure to consider local people’s interests and views.

We do not intend to say that the current Indian climate policy is a replication of these failed historical experiments. Rather, our argument is that in all large-scale political efforts, such as the fight against climate change, there lies a danger. If policies are planned from a bird's-eye view with insufficient knowledge of local conditions and livelihoods, they can go wrong. Thus, bio-fuels, hydropower dams and nuclear

stations may all reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions compared to coal-fired power plants and diesel-burning cars. But they are often dependent on large-scale redevelopment projects that affect the livelihoods of thousands of people on the ground.

This tension is visible in India in a series of protests and demands for dialogue between the state and local communities related to hydropower projects and the construction of nuclear power stations. Large-scale biofuel projects in many parts of the world have been halted not only due to their incapability to reduce emissions, but also because of resistance from local communities. To dismiss this resistance as mere selfish NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) is failing to learn from history, from the failure of the kinds of projects that Scott describes in his book. This does not mean, of course, that no such projects can ever work. But it does mean that in order to succeed, they need to draw from local sources of knowledge and understanding.

How Civil Society Can Act

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have the capability to act as a link between locals and decision-makers. They provide a draft of valid on-ground information to desk-based policy reviewers. Many CSOs in India are responsible for instigating the question-answer relation between the state and the local. Several organisations, including the South Asia

Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP), the Centre for Policy Research, the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) and the Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) are mapping state level implementation of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in India, often consulting with local groups to understand the potential effects of the plan on the ground.

Keeping track of the already occurring changes in local ecosystems is also of crucial importance in a country like India, which is one of the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. CSOs representing the affected communities such as farmers or fisherfolk can be important sources and conveyers of such knowledge. Sometimes such organisations join forces with international CSOs to combine their local knowledge with global advocacy expertise. One case of such collaboration is Greenpeace's work with the forest-dwellers and inhabitants of Mahan forest in Madhya Pradesh, one of the oldest *sal* (teak) forests in Asia. Greenpeace and the local inhabitants' organisation Mahan Sangharsh Samiti (MSS) oppose the state's action of coal mining and deforestation. They assert that this deforestation is not only going to affect the local ecology, but also some 15,000 people.

Another aspect in which locally rooted CSOs may be of help in meeting the challenges of climate change is by communicating knowledge in the opposite direction, that is, from researchers and policymakers to local communities. Many CSOs engage in awareness raising, educating people on the causes and effects of climate change and spreading awareness of the impact of the phenomenon on local livelihoods. Such endeavours range from the IYCN sensitising and engaging urban populations to La Via Campesina South Asia disseminating information among farmers. As transmitters, CSOs can help make sense of technical information that holds implications to the everyday lives of the affected people. Transfer of knowledge may entail changes in local production and consumption habits towards low-carbon lifestyles and increased sustainability.

The upcoming market of organic farming is one example. A number of organisations are educating farmers at the local level to harvest organically, which is both sustainable and profitable. The efforts of organisations such as the Organic Farming Association of India are observable in the rise of organic certification of farm produce for agricultural commodities like tea and spices.

Politics of Climate Change

In relation to the politics of climate change, there is a second possible way of understanding the phrase "seeing like a state." Seeing like a state, opposed to other states and determined to defend its own interests against other states that are assumed to do the same, is one possible way of doing international politics. In the case of climate politics, the obvious problem of such an approach is that it will not lead to an international agreement on cutting emissions. From this very perspective it is in every state's interest to free-ride and let the other states do the costly mitigation efforts (Maltais 2008).

From the point of view of major countries of the Global South like India, such a perspective to climate politics is especially problematic. Because these countries are the most vulnerable to the heating of the planet, they are the ones who lose the most if no global deal is achieved; by domestic efforts alone no country can slow down the dangerous warming.

India does have reason to expect self-interested behaviour from other states, particularly those from the Global North. It is undeniable that historically this is how these states have behaved, creating the present system of unequal global exchange. Countries of the Global South export "large quantities of under-priced products whose value does not include the environmental (and social) costs of their extraction, processing, or shipping," and as a result, "participation in international trade increases emissions in poorer countries but lowers them in wealthier countries" (Parks and Roberts 2010: 142).

Luckily, it has been shown that states do also act on other values than maximisation of their (economic) self-interest. The

development of a world society during the last century has created a global set of norms, related institutions and practices that states follow (to varying degrees) when they play the game of international politics. One set of norms, institutions and practices that has changed dramatically over the past four decades is that concerning the environment. Norms regulating pollution have proliferated. Environmental institutions such as ministries of the environment within nation states, sustainability departments in business corporations and institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the global level have all been invented during the past few decades. Practices of dumping waste that were commonplace in the 1970s are today unimaginable. We are yet to see if these changes go far enough in reducing CO₂ emissions, but viewed in a perspective of several decades, there is certainly momentum in environmentalism. The development of a global civil society has been one of the main drivers in the emergence of the world society and related environmental norms, institutions and practices (Hironaka 2014; Boli and Thomas 1997).

Concretely, CSOs have been involved in several successful efforts to shape global policy such as the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer, the freeing of generic medicine for HIV/AIDS and promoting debt relief for the poorest countries (Parks and Roberts 2010). Significantly, reducing greenhouse gas emissions is more costly and demanding than any of these three changes that global civil society has been successful in promoting. In the context of the global financial crisis, this is probably the biggest reason why the massive mobilisation of civil society in the Copenhagen climate conference of 2009 and beyond has failed to put pressure on states to act.

But the efforts of CSOs in global politics of climate change continue. Sometimes they are directly influenced by national and even global agendas. An early example of this was the well-known report by the Centre for Science and Environment, *Global Warming in an Unequal World* from 1991, which contributed to setting the negotiating agenda of the Indian government for years to come. It

also contributed to making the question of equity between the Global South and the North, one of the most central issues on which the future of the talks rests today, a part of the UNFCCC agenda.

Another way in which csos can make their mark in the global negotiating tables is by bringing the voice, opinion and knowledge of the poor and the marginalised to the attention of decision-makers. This has been the idea of people's tribunals on climate change, organised over the past several years in many countries of the Global South, including various locations around India. Following the model of the people's tribunal created by the philosopher and peace activist Bertrand Russell in the 1960s to draw attention to war crimes in Vietnam, the juries have collected localised knowledge by compiling testimonies from representatives of communities adversely affected by climate change. Globally organised cso networks have then brought this knowledge and the symbolic power of personal testimonies directly to decision-makers at the climate change negotiations by organising world-level tribunals there.

India has twice as many reasons to take these global civil society efforts seriously and support them. First, because of the morality attached to it, particularly for future generations and for the poor of the present, who are the most vulnerable to climate change. And second, because a significant proportion of the world's people who are hit the hardest by the warming of the planet are Indian citizens. Therefore, a global deal on curbing climate change ought to be a top priority of Indian policymakers.

Seeing Like Civil Society

One reason governments find it difficult to listen to and support csos is because they do not always agree with the government's point of view. Broadly speaking, while many csos support the Indian position that countries of the Global North bear the greatest responsibility for climate change and should be those to act first, they also disagree with the government in many ways. They have criticised the government for focusing too much on the equity between

countries and forgetting the question of equity between the rich and the poor within India (Greenpeace India 2007). They have also been critical of the process of formulating the NAPCC for being non-transparent and not acknowledging local people.¹

But, paradoxical as it may seem, these disagreements between csos and governments are precisely the reason why governments should be receptive to civil society input and supportive of their activities. This is not to say that csos are always right. Nor are they always speaking in unison; more often there is a wide variety of opinions and ideas. But the art for skilful policymaking is to learn from this diversity and take the knowledge and opinion that is offered. csos are worth listening to because they might just have seen something that the state cannot see.

Eyes on Paris 2015

There is a widely shared perception that the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC in Paris in December 2015 will be the most important one in years. This means that in the run-up to Paris, csos in India and around the world will likely be strongly mobilised. Smart

governments will take this upcoming opportunity to learn from civil society. Regardless of whether a deal will come out of the Paris COP, mitigation and adaptation efforts in India will have to continue. The likelihood of success of these efforts, too, will accelerate with increasing participation of civil society.

NOTE

- 1 Letter from 17 civil society organisations to the Prime Minister of India, "NAPCC and the National Water Mission," 27 July 2009; "Memorandum to the Government of India on the UNFCCC's 15th Conference of the Parties at Copenhagen."

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