

Active Citizenship through Bottom up Knowledge Generation and Peer Learning

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Health systems, and indeed many public systems are in crisis today with the increasing pressure of privatisation. At the same time there are calls for implementing rights based approaches which focus on strengthening the state apparatus and state investments for service delivery. In such conditions poor and marginalised communities in poor and poorly governed states are faced with the challenge of escalating costs, apathetic and unresponsive services of uncertain quality. Global targets often translate into coercion at the local level. In this entire scenario there is little space for communities or the ultimate beneficiaries for negotiating appropriate services, asking for improved quality and for articulating grievances.

Community based accountability mechanisms, often called social accountability mechanisms are emerging as an important imperative for increasing people's participation including demand for public services, improving program efficiency as well as promoting public program accountability. These methods have emerged from a deep frustration of marginalized people to hold public systems accountable at the local level, even as their 'states' kept making tall and sometimes empty promises through ineffective and inefficient policies. Experiments in diverse contexts of Latin America, South Asia and Africa have shown that citizen and civil society are able to compel 'states' to honour their promises using various methods of generating and collating evidence and arguing through these.

In the last three years COPASAH has been able to further strengthen such practices in the field of health by building capacity among a large number of practitioners in different regions of the world and also by developing a series of knowledge products which have distilled lessons from practice.

Today COPASAH members are at the vanguard of social accountability practices in many countries and there is considerable interest in taking the process forward.

There is also an emerging interest among donors in expanding the practice of social accountability for ensuring greater effectiveness of development aid. At least two global collectives¹ have been formed where donors, international technical organisations and governments are the principal actors. Researchers in Universities and research organisations are also interested in understanding the overall value of bottom up accountability measures in improving the effectiveness and quality of health services, and in health outcomes of the people. COPASAH is their conceptual ally but also somewhat different since its principal stakeholders are field practitioners and implementers, and its principal interest lies in broadening and deepening the processes of active citizenship through bottom up knowledge generation and peer to peer learning. COPASAH represents a unique practitioners' collective which derives theory from practice and also strengthens practice through innovation, learning and capacity building.

In this young and evolving field our members include individuals and organisation with a strong track record of existing work as well those who have just started working. In its short existence of a little over two years, COPASAH, has created a global presence with acknowledgement from various practitioners, academicians and donor communities. The knowledge products and the processes of learning from practice have received encouragement and appreciation. The membership of COPASAH has risen to nearly 200 and the listserv has over 600 members. We hope that this work will continue and will be able to provide a platform to the key actors in the field of social accountability in health through sharing knowledge and resources generated from field practice and interpreted by the practitioner.

About the Author:

Dr. Abhijit Das, Director - Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), Delhi, India is one of the founding members of COPASAH. Currently he is the member of global steering committee and will function as the global coordinator of COPASAH from 2015. CHSJ, is one of the pioneering organisations in the field of social accountability in health and community monitoring in India (www.chsj.org)

¹ TA Learn (<http://www.transparency-initiative.org/>) and Global Partnership for Social Accountability (<http://gpsaknowledge.org/>)