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Williams, GO, *et al* (2011) Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance: Participation and Political Empowerment in India

ESRC End of Award Report, RES-167-25-0268. Swindon: ESRC

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL END OF AWARD REPORT



For awards ending on or after 1 November 2009

This End of Award Report should be completed and submitted using the **grant reference** as the email subject, to **reportsofficer@esrc.ac.uk** on or before the due date.

The final instalment of the grant will not be paid until an End of Award Report is completed in full and accepted by ESRC.

Grant holders whose End of Award Report is overdue or incomplete will not be eligible for further ESRC funding until the Report is accepted. ESRC reserves the right to recover a sum of the expenditure incurred on the grant if the End of Award Report is overdue. (Please see Section 5 of the ESRC Research Funding Guide for details.)

Please refer to the Guidance notes when completing this End of Award Report.

Grant Reference	RES-167-25-0268		
Grant Title	Embedding poor people's voices in local governance: participation and political empowerment in India		
Grant Start Date	01/01/2008	Total Amount	£472,137.84
Grant End Date	30/11/ 2010	Expended:	
Grant holding Institution	University of Sheffield		
Grant Holder	Dr Glyn Williams		
Grant Holder's Contact Details	Address	Email	
	Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 1TN	glyn.williams@sheffield.ac.uk	
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Co-Investigators (as per project application):		Institution	
Dr Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya (Project Partner)		Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta	
Prof D Narayana (Project Partner)		Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum	
Binitha Thampi (Research Associates) Sailaja Nandigama (Research Associates)		University of Sheffield	

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1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Please provide below a project summary written in non-technical language. The summary may be used by ESRC to publicise your work and should explain the aims and findings of the project. *[Max 250 words]*

The project's central research question is: *to what extent do initiatives to make local governance more participatory enhance poor people's opportunities for political empowerment?*

Looking at West Bengal and Kerala, Indian States internationally recognised for innovation in decentralised governance, it examines poor people's use of the formal opportunities they have for participation within the local state. This 'invited participation' is examined within the context of the social relations reproducing poverty and marginalisation, and informal structures of authority and power, both of which reshape governance reforms away from their intended practice.

Through this grounded comparative study, it provides wider lessons about the opportunities and limitations for building poor people's political empowerment and substantive citizenship through programmes of governance reform.

The project's main contributions to work on poverty alleviation are:

- 1) To provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the interactions between poverty, participation and democratisation.
- 2) To provide a rich empirical evaluation participatory governance initiatives, through a comparative study of relevance across (and beyond) South Asia.
- 3) To contribute to local user communities by highlighting areas where the poor have opportunities for furthering their political empowerment.
- 4) To contribute to policy development through interaction with (and dissemination to) a wider policy community.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

a) Objectives

Please state the aims and objectives of your project as outlined in your proposal to the ESRC. *[Max 200 words]*

The project aims to critically review ideas and practices of governance reform from the perspectives of poor people themselves. It has four objectives:

O1) To provide a detailed comparative study of participatory governance initiatives' effects on poor communities' political engagement and marginalisation. Detailed qualitative research will provide rich empirical insights of significance beyond its case study locales.

O2) To provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the interactions between poverty, participation and democratisation, by contributing to theoretical debates on poverty alleviation, enhancing participation and governance reform.

O3) To contribute to local user communities through reflection on the empirical and theoretical results of the project within grassroots dissemination events. This dissemination process will highlight areas where the poor have opportunities for furthering their political empowerment, and strengthening links with potential partners in this process

O4) To contribute to policy development via structured interaction with a wider policy community. By

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maintaining contacts with these users, providing them with original insights into poor groups' current impediments and opportunities for empowerment, and by engaging them in high-level dissemination events focused around critical appraisal of current participatory governance initiatives, the project aims to significantly contribute to policy development.

b) Project Changes

Please describe any changes made to the original aims and objectives, and confirm that these were agreed with the ESRC. Please also detail any changes to the grant holder's institutional affiliation, project staffing or funding. [Max 200 words]

There were no changes to the project's original aims and objectives. Revisions to the original methodology were relatively minor (see section 2c below): the field research was successfully implemented, allowing objectives 1 and 2 to be met. As with most impact-related objectives, *delivery* on objectives 3 and 4 presupposes the interest, support or engagement of user groups, and as such is particularly open to factors beyond the project team's control. Within these constraints, the project team was able to undertake thorough discussion of the research findings within the field sites (objective 3); impact on policy makers (objective 4) is less direct and tangible (see section 3 below).

The project timetable was extended through the generous provision of an eleven-month, zero-cost extension by the ESRC. An extension was initially sought because of delays to the completion of the fieldwork (both Research Associates independently suffered from periods of ill-health, there were incidents of extreme political tension in one field site, and delays in completing key interviews in both Kerala and West Bengal caused by interviewees' unavailability in the run-up to India's general election in April-May 2009). A subsequent extension allowed the completion of an additional Delhi-based dissemination workshop (October 2010).

c) Methodology

Please describe the methodology that you employed in the project. Please also note any ethical issues that arose during the course of the work, the effects of this and any action taken. [Max. 500 words]

The project proposal envisaged a case-study based methodology, based in two locales in each State, to provide an in-depth picture of governance reform and its relationship to political (dis)empowerment in West Bengal and Kerala. This was presented and debated in inception workshops in the partner institutions (April 2008) that provided guidance about case study areas (Birbhum District as a bellwether for social and political conditions in West Bengal; Wayanad and Palakkad, Kerala as poverty-prone Districts with contrasting social and political histories). Following advice at these workshops, the project took an exclusive focus on *rural* governance: within this the operation of anti-poverty programmes of national importance (group-based micro-enterprise, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme) provided one substantive focus for the fieldwork and the cross-State comparisons emerging from it. The inception workshops also confirmed the importance of making marginalised groups' everyday experiences of local governance central to data collection *and* analysis: both formal and informal governance practices were treated on an equal footing throughout the fieldwork, and these experiences have been used to question existing understandings of the relationships between decentralisation, 'invited' participatory spaces and poverty alleviation.

The project successfully engaged with the three respondent groups identified in the proposal: high-level architects of participatory governance initiatives; implementers of those initiatives within the local state; and marginalised communities themselves. Fieldwork emphasised the latter two, and for

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each locale centred on a particular panchayat selected as socially/demographically representative of its surrounding area on the basis of secondary data. As envisaged in the proposal, identifying and building trust with marginalised groups took time: these were purposively selected groups that allowed the project to look at economic-, political- and caste/community-based marginalisation in some depth. Over 280 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these groups, preceded by focus groups and a questionnaire covering over 800 households per locale (the questionnaire was an addition to the original proposal, and enabled a snapshot of some basic indicators of material poverty and engagement with local government within each locale). Inevitably, some interviewees, particularly those from socially ostracised groups, were less willing to voice concerns or reflections than others, but participant observation work (field teams were present throughout a seven month period) allowed further insights into their engagement with local governance structures. Participant observation work across the four locales and a further 20 semi-structured interviews with key resource persons (elected local politicians, civil servants and others) within each gave a clear insight into those implementing participatory governance initiatives across the field sites.

The proposal accurately anticipated the ethical challenges faced during fieldwork, and the research associate/field assistant teams were able to successfully address these, sensitively negotiating access to field areas via local politicians, and building trust with research participants. Processes to ensure informed consent and respondents' anonymity worked well. The outbreak of politically-motivated violence in one West Bengal locale resulted in the temporary suspension of the fieldwork there, but the field team were able to recommence work without any significant disruption of their relationship with local 'power brokers' or marginalised groups.

d) Project Findings

Please summarise the findings of the project, referring where appropriate to outputs recorded on *ESRC Society Today*. Any future research plans should also be identified. [Max 500 words]

Poverty, exclusion and marginalisation:

The project conceptualises poverty as a relational condition, entrenched through resilient forms of social and political marginalisation. This informs its critical evaluation of:

- *Poverty Measurement*: Local councils draw up lists of 'Below Poverty Line' households, a key measure in welfare targeting, a form of devolution with unintended consequences. Political pressures to expand those within the list (Kerala), or to capture it for particular political interests (West Bengal), each work against the interests of the poorest and most marginalised.
- *Anti-Poverty Measures and Economic 'Uplift'*: **Group-based micro-enterprise schemes** (SGSY, Kudumbashree) can foster social networks, but training/support for group development is often insufficient (West Bengal), and success is dependent on stocks of economic and cultural capital unavailable to the poorest. **State-guaranteed employment provision** (India's celebrated NREGA) side-steps these problems, but remains open to local political capture. Neither tackles underlying causes of livelihood insecurity (e.g. Kerala's agrarian crisis).
- *Promoting 'Active Citizenship' within poverty alleviation*: Kerala's Kudumbashree programme is laudable in challenging some elements of women's marginalisation and promoting their involvement in local governance, but places further responsibility on them for their families economic uplift, and to support the activities of the local state.

Policy Implications:

Government of India poverty alleviation strategies need to be extended in three dimensions:

- *Spatially*: poverty alleviation policy must address structurally-produced pressures on livelihoods beyond self-help groups' or local councils' scale for intervention
- *Culturally*: resilient forms of marginalisation must be explicitly recognised as *reproducing* poverty, rather than as residual features which individual economic 'uplift' will overcome.

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- *Politically*: exclusion *produced by* poverty alleviation strategies, through abuses in implementation (e.g. political capture) or inherent within them (e.g. expectations of 'active citizenship') require explicit recognition within policy design.

(Refs: See journal articles 1, 2: section 3a)

Poverty, participation and political society:

The project conceptualises governance as being shaped by both formal state institutions and informal practices, and recognises that both structure the opportunities open to poor people to express their political voice.

The key findings

- Local leaders maintain authority by deliberately melding formal positions (as elected representatives) and informal roles (as feudal patrons or moral patriarchs)
- Party political competition drives control of the local state: in West Bengal, party identity is essential in most struggles over authority; Kerala's political society remains more pluralist but panchayat-level power dynamics are increasingly important after decentralisation
- Poor people's own political strategies reflect their dependence on local power brokers for access to formal state resources (e.g. welfare programmes) and informal support (e.g. dispute resolution)

The policy implications:

- Democratic 'deepening' cannot be achieved solely by redesigning formal state structures: changes in political culture are also required – but are less amenable to government intervention
- Decentralising government does not guarantee democratic participation: poor people may not be free to take up local 'invited' spaces for participation, and alternative mechanisms to represent their interests at higher spatial scales are also necessary

(Refs: See journal articles 1, 3: section 3a)

Future research plans: section 3b below.

e) Contributions to wider ESRC initiatives (eg Research Programmes or Networks)

If your project was part of a wider ESRC initiative, please describe your contributions to the initiative's objectives and activities and note any effect on your project resulting from participation. *[Max. 200 words]*

The project has aimed to contribute towards the wider intellectual agenda of the ESRC-DFID Joint Programme to produce 'blue skies' thinking about poverty in two ways. The first is that referred to in section 2d – seeing poverty as inherently political, both as an object of policy and as a lived social relation, and through this contributing to Adverse Incorporation/ Social Exclusion approaches to poverty. The second is through its methodological approach noted in section 2c, basing its theorisation around marginalised people's own experiences of poverty.

Direct interaction with other Programme projects has been achieved by inviting PIs of other relevant ESRC-DFID projects to this project's Sheffield-based dissemination workshop (March 25th, 2010), where Anuprita Shukla represented 'The social conditions for successful community mobilisation' (project ref: RES-167-25-0193) attended. At the Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference (August 31st, 2010), a paper based around the experience of managing the project was presented at the session 'Researching the Global South in an Age of Impact' alongside a parallel paper by Nicola Ansell (PI for 'Averting New Variant Famine': project ref: RES-167-25-0167). The project team will continue to engage in future opportunities for joint working across the Programme which emerge in future.

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3. EARLY AND ANTICIPATED IMPACTS

a) Summary of Impacts to date

Please summarise any impacts of the project to date, referring where appropriate to associated outputs recorded on *ESRC Society Today*. This should include both scientific impacts (relevant to the academic community) and economic and societal impacts (relevant to broader society). The impact can be relevant to any organisation, community or individual. *[Max. 400 words]*

Scientific impacts:

Project findings have been presented to academic audiences in India, the UK and internationally through the project's own dissemination workshops and presentations at major conferences. The completion of the remaining planned journal articles (see section 3b: all to be submitted by 01/09/2011) will exceed the project's publication targets, and ensure its contribution to cross-disciplinary debates in Development Studies, Political Science, South Asian Studies and Geography.

From the objectives listed above:

O1) It has provided a detailed comparative study of participatory governance initiatives' effects on the poor in West Bengal and Kerala which has wider significance within and beyond South Asia.

O2) It is making a significant theoretical contribution to:

- Poverty alleviation – understanding linkages between state strategies and existing patterns of exclusion in the reproduction of poverty
- Enhancing participation – understanding limitations on processes of participatory governance
- Governance reform – understanding the interaction of formal and informal bases of power within local governance

Summary of Scientific Outputs to Date

A) 3 submitted journal articles:

- 1) Williams, Thampi *et al*. 'Performing Participatory Citizenship...', *Journal of Development Studies*, in press)
- 2) Williams, Thampi *et al*. 'The Politics of Defining and Alleviating Poverty: state strategies and their impacts in rural Kerala' In review: *Geoforum*.
- 3) Williams, Nandigama *et al*. 'Managing Political Space: party practices, marginalised people's agency and the governance of rural West Bengal'. In review: *Development and Change*.

B) 4 One-day dissemination Workshops: CDS Trivandrum, CSSSC Kolkata, University of Sheffield, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

C) 6 Invited Seminar Presentations: Universities of Cambridge, Leeds, Sheffield, Salford, Reading and Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata.

D) 4 Presentations at major international conferences: Chronic Poverty Research Centre, University of Manchester; the Royal Geographical Society (2009 and 2010); and the Development Studies Association.

Societal impacts:

From the objectives listed above:

O3) Contribution to local user communities:

- Local dissemination workshops with all research participants, allowing debate on findings and their local, practical implications
- Distribution of a village-level dissemination document (West Bengal), outlining the proper functioning of local government bodies
- A more extensive document is being completed for Kerala, for wider dissemination.

O4) Contribution to policy development:

- State-level workshops in Kerala and West Bengal to which key policy audiences from both

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states were invited

- Discussion of key project findings with DFID-India (October 2010)
- Ongoing societal impact activity (see section 3b) is targeted at a wider policy community.

b) Anticipated/Potential Future Impacts

Please outline any anticipated or potential impacts (scientific or economic and societal) that you believe your project might have in future. *[Max. 200 words]*

Scientific Impact

Journal Articles in prep (target journals in italics):

- 4) 'Decentralisation and the Changing Geographies of Political Marginalisation in Kerala' *Political Geography*.
- 5) 'Crafting Participatory Governance? The Evolution of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal' *Third World Quarterly*
- 6) 'Village Voices: grassroots experiences of participation and exclusion in West Bengal' *Contemporary South Asia*
- 7) 'Tackling Chronic Poverty: reflecting on direct intervention through West Bengal's experience' *World Development*
- 8) 'Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance I: Poverty, Exclusion and Marginalisation' *EPW*
- 9) 'Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance II: Evaluating Participatory Governance' *EPW*
- 10) 'Embedding Poor People's Voices in Local Governance I: The Impact of Political Society' *EPW*

Societal Impact

- Briefing notes, summarising all completed journal articles for a policy audience, will be produced and placed on a project website.
- Articles 8-10 are targeted at Economic and Political Weekly, which is widely read by Indian policy makers and other audiences: joint publication will be sought as a special section, which would make a significant contribution to public debate in this field.
- Within Kerala, a report on the project findings will be disseminated through local councils in the state as a further avenue to promote public debate.

You will be asked to complete an ESRC Impact Report 12 months after the end date of your award. The Impact Report will ask for details of any impacts that have arisen since the completion of the End of Award Report.

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4. DECLARATIONS

Please ensure that sections A, B and C below are completed and signed by the appropriate individuals. The End of Award Report will not be accepted unless all sections are signed.

Please note hard copies are NOT required; electronic signatures are accepted and should be used.

A: To be completed by Grant Holder

Please read the following statements. Tick ONE statement under ii) and iii), then sign with an electronic signature at the end of the section.

i) The Project

This Report is an accurate overview of the project, its findings and impacts. All co-investigators named in the proposal to ESRC or appointed subsequently have seen and approved the Report.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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ii) Submissions to *ESRC Society Today*

Output and impact information has been submitted to <i>ESRC Society Today</i> . Details of any future outputs and impacts will be submitted as soon as they become available.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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OR

This grant has not yet produced any outputs or impacts. Details of any future outputs and impacts will be submitted to <i>ESRC Society Today</i> as soon as they become available.	<input type="checkbox"/>
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OR

This grant is not listed on <i>ESRC Society Today</i> .	<input type="checkbox"/>
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iii) Submission of Datasets

Datasets arising from this grant have been offered for deposit with the Economic and Social Data Service.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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OR

Datasets that were anticipated in the grant proposal have not been produced and the Economic and Social Data Service has been notified.	<input type="checkbox"/>
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OR

No datasets were proposed or produced from this grant.	<input type="checkbox"/>
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