

Local institutions and social policy for children

Opportunities and constraints
of participatory service delivery

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Abstract

If India is to reach the Millennium Development Goals to reduce child mortality, eradicate hunger and promote gender equality, innovative policy solutions are urgently needed as economic growth and overall poverty reduction alone will not be enough. This paper evaluates an attempt in Andhra Pradesh to improve the outreach, quality and accountability of educational, health and Early Childhood Development services by involving parents closely in their monitoring and management. Participatory Education Committees and Mothers' Committees were established in the context of a growing consensus in national and international policy circles that decentralisation and community participation are critical for improved coverage, responsiveness and quality of public services.

Although there have been some clear gains in terms of greater participation among parents in child-related user committees, opportunities for meaningful participation are still mediated to a significant degree by committee members' class, caste, gender and political affiliations. These grassroots parallel institutions have had some impact on service delivery for poor children, particularly in terms of outreach and infrastructural development. They have been less effective, however, in shaping service quality and institutionalising linkages with decision-makers who have the power to influence policy development. In order to realise the potential of parental participation in service delivery and monitoring, our research findings suggest that the following reforms should therefore be considered:

1. *Increased attention to committees' capacity-building needs:* All Mothers' Committee and Village Education Committee members should be provided with adequate information about their mandate, roles and responsibilities and have the opportunity to develop their capacities to discuss issues with often better-educated officials and service providers with confidence.
2. *Better incentives for participation:* It is important to disentangle the quasi-community health extension assistant role of Mothers' Committees from their monitoring role. Health extension work should be formally recognised and adequately compensated, whereas Mothers' Committees need to be reconfigured as an independent monitoring body with sufficient powers to make a difference to the quality of maternal and child health and early development services.
3. *Explicit accountability mechanisms* would help ensure that committee chairpersons are accountable to other parents as well as the wider community. User committees could be brought into a structure of cross-accountability with the village *panchayat*.
4. *More structured opportunities to interact with authorities* could develop an institutional channel to articulate common concerns and exchange information among grassroots committees, following the experiences of the women's self-help group federations at mandal, district and state level.

5. *Careful devolution* of a wider range of responsibilities to schools, *anganwadi* centres and local governments would allow more meaningful local participation. In the context of further sub-state decentralisation, it is important that local governments as well as parents are adequately equipped to deal with not only infrastructural development and outreach, but also issues around service quality and service provider accountability.

Introduction

Relative to its status as a middle-income country, India lags behind in child well-being indicators. One out of every three malnourished children in the world live in India (UNICEF, 2006) and the country is currently off-track in terms of reaching the Millennium Development Goal to reduce child mortality by two-thirds by 2015. Although school enrolment rates have improved significantly over the last decade-and-a-half, girls' primary school enrolment rate is still only 76 per cent. 14 per cent of children are categorised as being involved in child labour and over one-quarter are victims of child marriage (*ibid.*). There is a pressing need for innovative policy solutions to tackle these manifestations of childhood poverty, as economic growth or reduction of overall levels of poverty alone will not be enough.

In this paper, we evaluate a recent attempt in Andhra Pradesh state to involve communities in closer monitoring and management of education, health and Early Childhood Development services in order to improve their outreach, quality and responsiveness. Since the mid-1990s, Andhra Pradesh – a state of 76 million people – has been extolled for its promising reform programmes in India, and international donors provided the charismatic Chief State Minister, Chandrababu Naidu, with large loans to carry out fiscal and poverty reduction reforms.¹ A key prong of Naidu's reform agenda was the development of participatory grass-roots bodies that would function in parallel to the previously established elected local councils (*panchayati raj* institutions). These user committees or parallel institutions were envisioned as more responsive to citizens' context-specific needs as well as less prone to elite capture and political interference.² Focusing on school education committees³ (which promote community participation in monitoring education service quality) and mothers' committees (which monitor maternal/child health and development services), the paper assesses to what extent these committees are fulfilling their intended purpose of empowering communities and improving service delivery for poor children.

Whereas other user associations have been the subject of a growing body of research (eg, Alsop *et al.*, 2002; Reddy and Reddy, 2005), to date there has been little analysis of the impacts of committees responsible for monitoring child-related services. This is an area, however, of major policy importance and its politics are distinct from those of natural resource management in several important respects. Children lack political rights and are thus not a potential source of votes for elected officials; there is no dedicated agency responsible for overseeing child-related

¹ Although Chandrababu Naidu (CBN) successfully earned the reputation of a high-tech modern reformist within the international community, his administration failed to make major inroads into combating rural poverty and the increasing agrarian distress (Dev, forthcoming). Although Andhra Pradesh has been relatively successful in reducing income poverty, the state's human and gender development indices not only remain below the national average but have also shown only slow signs of improvement over the last decade. The absolute value of the UN Human Development Index (HDI) for Andhra Pradesh is 0.416, which is below the national HDI value of 0.577 in 2002. As elsewhere in India, the UN Gender Development Index (GDI) value is lower than HDI value, at 0.400 (national GDI is 0.560), indicating the persistence of gender inequalities in access to health and education (Galab *et al.*, 2003).

² Naidu argued that there was a need for "participation of stakeholders through groups/committees for reducing leakages in the delivery system while creating a sense of ownership among the beneficiaries". CBN's speech during the 49th National Development Council Meeting at New Delhi in September 2001.

³ School education committees were attached to every government school in Andhra Pradesh. Most villages had only one government school and hence these committees were often termed 'village education committees'.

service delivery at the local level; and in contrast to water users or forestry management associations, for example, education and mothers' committees do not attract substantial funding.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 surveys theoretical literature on decentralisation, community participation and service delivery; Section 3 describes our research methods; Section 4 presents the main findings; and in Section 5 we discuss our conclusions and policy challenges related to improving public services for children within a participatory governance framework.

Decentralization, participation and child-focused services: Theory and international experience

Calls for greater decentralization across the developing world can be located within a wider project of reforming the role and nature of the state as an agent of development. Proponents consider the transfer of management responsibilities and powers from central governments to local institutions as a way to increase popular participation in governance, promote more equitable, responsive and efficient management of resources and reduce the centre's responsibilities (Crook and Manor, 1998; Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Reddy *et al*, 2006). Strengthening local participatory governance can also be seen as a response to the perceived defects of representative liberal democracy. Strengthening the power of local democratic institutions and promoting initiatives for direct participation in local governance is viewed as a mechanism to deepen democracy (Mehrotra, 2006; Gaventa, 2006).

In the wake of two decades of decentralization across Latin America, Africa and Asia, however, no robust empirical link has been established between such reforms and poverty reduction or political inclusion (e.g. Crook and Manor, 1998; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001). Proponents of decentralization argue that the fact that decentralization does not always lead to desired outcomes is caused by a lack of sufficient political commitment to reform within national governments. Reforms tend to be superficial and real power and most resources remain centralized. Even in the context of meaningful devolution of power, resources and staff; low capacity and inadequate allocation of resources to address capacity-building needs often hamper effective local governance (Bardhan, 2002).

Lastly, without strong accountability mechanisms and social mobilization for more comprehensive reforms, decentralization is unlikely to lead to the identification of community needs and may rather serve to legitimize the informal power of local elites. It is also increasingly argued that disadvantaged groups may need external support from central government authorities or civil society organizations to enable them to take advantage of new spaces opened up by reforms and to act as a check on the power of local elites (Mehrotra, 2006; Tendler, 1997; Johnson *et al*, 2005).

Local governance, participation and public service delivery

In more recent years, governments and donors have increasingly channelled resources to local user groups and newly formed participatory institutions, in addition to, and potentially at the expense of, previously established local government institutions. In contrast to the multi-purpose elected local governments, user groups tend to be responsible for managing single-sector issues (e.g. education, forestry or watersheds) and draw their constituents exclusively from the users of the particular resource or service. According to Manor (2004), donor enthusiasm for user committees arises partly from an interest in facilitating the micro-management of development programmes but also from "a growing (and admirable) donor

belief in the importance of giving people at the grass roots greater influence over decisions that affect them" (194).

Service monitoring committees are also central to the new paradigm of client-driven (rather than citizen-centred or rights-based) approach to public services (World Bank, 2003; Devarajan and Shah, 2004). User committees are promoted as institutional mechanisms to increase the bargaining power of service users vis-à-vis providers in situations where service providers lack a sense of downward accountability toward their clients and where poor people lack the ability to influence policy through the representative political system. In addition to allowing some participation in social policy planning, the 'second wave of decentralisation' has also often meant that users are required to participate in bearing part of the costs of social service provision (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001).

The enthusiasm for user participation also reflects the adoption of the previously rather radical language of 'participation' and 'empowerment' by mainstream development actors. Although attempts to open up policy spaces for more inclusive participation is in principle desirable, past evaluations of participatory initiatives have shown that new institutional arrangements can too often just replicate existing patterns of power and exclusion. An emphasis on the ideal of 'community empowerment' may risk overlooking power differentials and oppressive social norms within groups (Williams 2004; Cornwall, 2002). Informal power structures and norms not only determine who is able to attend meetings or to speak up, but they also limit the type of issues that are raised and that people even consider possible.

Child-related services

Issues of power relations are particularly complex in the context of child-related service delivery as children are typically excluded from the policy process and their voices seldom heard (e.g. Sinclair, 2004). This is due to age-based notions of citizenship, and questions relating to children's evolving capacities over the course of childhood, and the appropriateness of their direct participation in the policy arena, particularly pre-adolescents (e.g. Ansell, 2005; Lansdown, 2005). The challenge for advocates of child well-being then is to ensure that children's rights or interests are adequately represented in policy debates. This is particularly difficult in contexts where there is a dearth of specialised children's agencies, and/or parents lack sufficient knowledge and awareness to effectively champion child-sensitive service provision.

Insights from literature on decentralisation and service delivery suggest that what is critical is a balance between local knowledge and priorities on the one hand, and adequate financing and national quality control mechanisms on the other (e.g. Lockheed, 2006). In order to ensure that minimum standards are adhered to, progress against a common policy framework (such as national action plans for children) needs to be monitored, especially given that to date there is at best mixed evidence as to whether decentralization improves welfare outcomes and mitigates inequalities and social exclusion (e.g. Mwesigye, 1999; UNESCO, 2003).

In addition to problems of voicelessness, there is a growing consensus that childhood poverty is multi-dimensional and in order to tackle it effectively an integrated, inter-sectoral approach is needed (e.g. Harper, 2004). For example, poor nutrition and lack of access to preventive and curative health care, clean water and sanitation may impact on children and young people in

ways that result in irreversible damage, making transient poverty a chronic characteristic. Similarly malnutrition in adolescent girls may affect their reproductive health and in turn foetal development (Bird *et al.*, 2002; Harper, 2004). As the World Bank (2005b) emphasises:

“any children and youth strategy – be it national, regional, or global – needs to be multi-sectoral and multidimensional. [...] Interventions should [...] address children and youth well-being simultaneously in several sectors, as well as through integrated packages of services and activities specifically tailored to their needs”.

In practice, however, the delivery of child-related services is too often fragmented and under-resourced (e.g. Mehotra *et al.*, 2000), particularly as governmental children’s agencies tend to be among the most marginalised (Harper, 2004).

A third challenge that is exacerbated by children’s exclusion from policy processes and the poor coordination of child-related services, is ensuring that diverse children’s differential needs are taken into account and inform policy decisions (Bradbury *et al.*, 2001). Children of different ages, gender, ethnic backgrounds, physical and cognitive abilities all experience poverty differently, with disadvantages often being cumulative (e.g. Lyytikainen *et al.*, 2006). This suggests that participatory service delivery mechanisms need to be designed so that policies and programmes adequately address children’s diversities.

Research questions

Emerging from this literature, therefore, a number of crucial questions we have to address when evaluating user committees as spaces for participation in local governance: “Who participates? Whose claims do they represent? What versions of poverty and what framing devices are deployed in these spaces?” (Brock *et al.* 2001: 35). It is equally important to ask whose voices are left out, what kind of questions are not discussed, and why (*Ibid.*). In addition to the nature and quality of participation, we also evaluate whether the committees are having an impact on the quality of public services. Under what circumstances can committees improve services most effectively and what type of tasks can they undertake with greatest impact? Finally, what are the specific lessons for the design of participatory initiatives aimed at improving *child-related* services? Although children are increasingly considered to have rights as individuals, they still have little voice in public decision-making. As the design of the Education Committees and Mothers’ Committees draws from a conventional view that parents are best able to represent the interests of their sons and daughters, it is particularly important to explore what type of incentive structures are in place for members to advocate on the behalf of their children and whether adults are always good interpreters of the multi-dimensionality of children’s – and different children’s (girls or boys, infants or adolescents) interests.

Research methods

The research findings presented in this paper are part of a broader longitudinal policy research study funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), 'Young Lives', which focuses on childhood poverty in the developing world from 2001 to 2015. In-depth qualitative research, supported by UNICEF India, was undertaken in a sub-sample of Young Lives project sites during three rounds of field research in 2006 (Please see map in Appendix 1).

Four *mandals*⁴ were selected across the three main agro-climatic regions of Andhra Pradesh on the basis of (a) community poverty status and human development indicators; and (b) caste⁵ composition. Table 1 highlights the variation in poverty and human development indicators across the four sites, which are as follows:

1. Amrabad *mandal*, Mehboobnagar district, Telangana region (South)
2. Atlur *mandal*, Cuddapah district, Rayalseema region
3. Kataram *mandal*, Karimnagar district, Telangana region (North)
4. Seethampet *mandal*, Srikakulam district, Coastal Andhra region.

Our qualitative data collection methodology included in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with committee members, members of the general public, school children, services providers, local government representatives and line department officials. In the course of this study, a team of local research assistants conducted 19 focus group discussions and 170 semi-structured interviews in the four *mandals*.

The objective was to gather information on: the structure and functioning of the committees in practice; barriers and catalysts to inclusive and effective participation; and the viewpoints and attitudes of parents, schoolchildren, front-line service providers and government officials regarding committee impact. Although the qualitative methodology does not permit us to make statistical comparisons of change over time or in comparison with other service delivery mechanisms, we believe, however, that such an in-depth approach is important when trying to understand power dynamics among parents, committee members and chairpersons as well as between service providers or officials and committees. Given diverse justifications of user participation at official levels – ranging from the need for client-driven services to the importance of civil society development and empowerment – it was clear that the committees would mean different things to different people and we wanted to understand how these discourses were interpreted at the local level.

⁴ *Mandals* are territorial and administrative units within the three-tiered structure of local governance in Andhra Pradesh. They are typically composed of 10–20 villages, and 5–10 *mandals* together form a district.

⁵ Caste is a form of social stratification within the Hindu religion, ascribed by virtue of birth. There are four main categories within the caste system: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), Shudras (untouchables). Hundreds of area-specific sub-castes have emerged from these four castes. In Andhra Pradesh, the three higher castes include castes such as Brahmins, Kammas and Reddys, which are also the land-owning class. Lower castes are further officially classified as Backward Castes (BC) and Scheduled Castes (SC), on the basis of the economic condition of the community in a particular area. Earlier people aspired to move up in the hierarchy of social status, but now members of lower castes are more likely to self-identify as BC or SC in order to access governmental affirmative-action programmes and benefits.

The interviews were conducted across different villages in each *mandal* to gain an overall picture of the area and the functioning of the grass-roots committees in each site, after which one village was chosen for a more detailed case study and the majority of interviews were then conducted there (see Table 2).⁶ This was done in order to build a richer description of one education committee and one mothers' committee in each *mandal* and for better triangulation of interview findings. We attempted to capture the diversity of our research sites in the selection of the case study villages, but were also somewhat constrained by the local elections that took place during the first round of field work which hindered our access to respondents. Although the case study villages in three of the four *mandals* were outside the *mandal* headquarters, we returned to the latter and to district headquarters for interviews with key informants within the Education Department and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).

Table 1: Research site characteristics

District Mandal	Mehboobnagar Amrabad	Cuddapah Atlur	Karimnagar Kataram	Srikakulam Seethampet
<i>District level (out of total of 23 districts in Andhra Pradesh)</i>				
Poverty ranking ⁷	21 ^a	2 ^a	1 ^a	19 ^a
Child mortality rate ranking	21 ^a	5 ^a	2 ^a	20 ^a
Literacy				
Overall	44.4%	62.8%	54.9%	55.3%
Female	31.9%	69.5%	42.8%	43.7%
Public to private school ratio	4.5:1	2.23:1	1.57:1	14.0:1
Net enrolment rate				
upper primary	44.6%	47.0%	59.0%	47.3%
Retention rate	39.5%	-	82.9%	89.8%
	45%	46.7%	47%	47%
Girls' primary/ upper primary school enrolment as a percentage of total enrolment				
<i>Mandal level</i>				
Caste composition	Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)	Mixed	Mixed	Scheduled Tribes (ST)
Dominant livelihood patterns	Low levels of agricultural production; seasonal migration to state capital	Low levels of agricultural production; migration to the Middle East	Seasonal migration to nearby towns	Agriculture and horticulture

Source: National Institute of Education Planning and Administration, 2004; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2006; Dev, 2002.

⁶ In the case of Atlur *mandal* we conducted interviews in two villages because, owing to highly politicised elections, we were unable to locate a sufficient spread of respondents in a single village.

⁷ The districts with the lowest rankings have the least people under the poverty line (i.e. Mehboobnagar has the highest poverty headcount among the four districts in this study).

Table 2: Village case study sites

	Amrabad	Atlur	Kataram	Seethampet
Village case study	Mannaur	Kumbagiri and Vemuluru ⁸	Chintikani	Seethampet

Box 1: Site characteristics

Amrabad in Mehboobnagar district, Telangana region, is a rural area and predominantly populated by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The district has the largest poverty head count out of the four sites and performs poorly in terms of all of the human development indicators presented in Table 1. Large scale seasonal migration to Hyderabad takes place due to low agricultural production and the area’s proximity to the state capital. Many of these migrants are child and women workers. The area is also affected by the presence of Naxalite forces, which make government officials reluctant to implement programmes and prevent local people from gaining access to authorities and information.

Atlur is a mandal in Cuddapah district, part of Rayalseema region. Although the area is marked by dry and arid land, the district has relatively low percentage of population under the official poverty line. Literacy rates in the district are the highest out of our four sites. Due to lower level of agricultural production, large scale migration to other parts of the state and also to Middle East countries is very common. Political factionalism is rampant since historically also the area has seen lot of political activity due to emergence of state level leaders from the district. The villages are characterized by caste diversity.

Kataram is in Karimnagar district, which has the lowest poverty head count in Andhra Pradesh. The site is located in the underdeveloped Telangana region, which may explain its modest literacy rates and a very high private school enrolment rate: there are less than two government schools for each private school in the district. In the movement for a separate Telengana state, Karimnagar has seen lot of political activism in the last election.

Seethampet is in Srikakulam district in North Coastal Andhra. It is comparatively underdeveloped due to its hilly topography and frequent floods. It has a majority Scheduled Tribe (ST) population and the district ranks low in the state with regard to poverty and child mortality. Various government initiatives for welfare and development have been initiated in the area and educational indicators are at a level similar to other less poor areas, such as Kataram.

In order to explore the argument often presented in the literature that external support from civil society organisations may serve as an important catalyst for pro-poor participation and decentralisation, we visited two more sites with an active NGO with links to the committees. These two sites were in Shankarpalli *mandal* (Ranga Reddy district), where a local NGO, the MV Foundation was working with education committees, and in Gajwel *mandal* (Medak district), where CARE India was supporting the work of the ICDS and the mothers’ committees. The

⁸ In the case of Atlur mandal we conducted interviews in two villages as due to highly politicised elections we were unable to locate a sufficient spread of respondents in a single village.

rationale for this research component was to gain some understanding of the determinants of successful education committees and mothers' committees. Caution should be exercised, however, in drawing firm conclusions from these findings, as the sample is small, and their selection was purposive rather than random. The fact that we approached the two NGOs and asked them for information on the areas where they work would have given them the incentive to present the best of their sites to us. These sites therefore may not be very representative of average sites with NGO involvement but should rather be considered as examples of best practices.

Findings

Reflecting a growing international emphasis on decentralisation and community empowerment in poverty reduction efforts, education committees (ECs) and mothers' committees (MCs) were established in Andhra Pradesh state in 1998 as part of a wider programme of governance reforms. The then State Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu promoted natural resource user groups, service-monitoring committees and self-help groups as mechanisms to promote more accountable local governance and empower individuals and communities to improve their own well-being. In particular, user committees have been conceptualised as a mechanism for direct participation in contrast to representative participation in local government structures (e.g. Reddy *et al.* 2006). Unlike previously established *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs), they focus only on single-sector issues and draw all their constituents from the users of the particular service. Participation is at least in theory open to everyone and often a rhetoric of community empowerment may encourage a perception that such structures for direct participation can insulate service delivery from the undesirable 'politics' of representative institutions, and thus may be more inclusive, effective and transparent in their use of funds (Manor, 2004).

However, the user committee initiative has also proved controversial on a number of fronts. Some critics claim that, although providing additional channels for the poor to voice their demands for improved services, the new parallel bodies⁹ at best cause confusion and replicate the functions of established local government structures (*panchayati raj* institutions [PRIs]) or at worst weaken local democracy by diverting funds and responsibilities from the PRIs to committees easily controlled by the bureaucracy or the ruling party (Powis, 2003).¹⁰ There are also concerns that user committees compromise the goals of political inclusion and social advancement, particularly in cases where they effectively negated the principle of reserving leadership positions in PRIs for lower castes and women by offering upper-caste community leaders leadership positions in parallel institutions (*Ibid.*; Reddy *et al.*, 2006).

This section assesses these issues of inclusive participation and impact on service quality and access in the context of child-related service delivery, the politics of which are distinct from those of natural resource management or savings and loans groups in several important respects. Children lack political rights and are thus not a potential source of votes for elected officials; there is no dedicated agency responsible for overseeing child-related service delivery at the local level; and in contrast to water users or forestry management associations, for example, education and mothers' committees do not attract substantial funding.¹¹ The

⁹ The participatory local governance bodies that have sprung up in Andhra Pradesh and across the developing world since the mid-1990s have been termed 'user committees', 'stakeholder associations' or 'community-based organisations' (CBOs). In this paper, we use the term 'parallel institutions', which has been adopted as the standard term to describe the local bodies introduced by the Chandrababu Naidu government in Andhra Pradesh. These grass-roots bodies are considered parallel to the existing local sub-state *panchayati raj* institutions in terms of their governance functions and funding.

¹⁰ Powis documents the way in which parallel institutions were used by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) to offer opportunities of political employment for their own cadres at the grass roots (Powis, 2003). Although Kirk (2005) argues that CBN largely continued in the tradition of his populist welfarist forebears at the sub-state level, Mooij (2003) emphasises that populism in Andhra Pradesh changed during the 1990s, from an old-fashioned welfarist donative discourse of free rice and electricity to a more 'targeted' populism centred around fashionable ideas of self-help and stakeholders, ie, helping people to help themselves.

¹¹ Women's welfare officers at the district level only.

following discussion draws out themes which are common to committees across our research sites, but also highlights differences and their underlying dynamics where relevant.

Participation: opportunities and constraints

Both education and nutrition/health services have traditionally been highly centralised in India. The establishment of education and mothers' committees in Andhra Pradesh was in part an effort to develop a sense of ownership by local communities, increase service uptake and to encourage demand-led service provision (eg. Manor, 2004). This need was particularly pressing in the case of maternal and child health and early child development services, which are the responsibility of the ICDS, a programme funded and managed by the Union of India federal government. Education services are similarly funded under a nationwide programme, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*, with some state-level input into education policy development.¹²

Mothers' committees were established to improve ICDS *anganwadi* services (child and maternal health and referral services, supplementary nutrition, immunisations, health and nutrition education, preschool education) and their responsibilities include expanding the outreach of and monitoring *anganwadi* services as well as government health campaigns (eg. Pulse Polio).¹³ According to governmental regulations, committees consist of eight women – one of whom is elected leader – who all use the *anganwadi* centre either because they are pregnant, or have pre-school age children or adolescent girls. Membership tenure is formally for two years and contingent upon regular participation in weekly/bi-weekly meetings.¹⁴

School education committees were established to improve school management under the 1998 Andhra Pradesh School Education (Community Participation) Act. Comprising four members selected from among parents whose children attend the local government school, the ECs' formal responsibilities included monitoring teacher attendance and performance, hiring local teachers, promoting student enrolment, attendance, retention and scholastic achievement, managing the funding and construction of school facilities (infrastructure, equipment, health programmes), and interacting with parents to promote parental commitment to children's schooling. In order to facilitate these activities, the EC chairperson, who was elected from among EC members, was expected to work closely with the school principal. Reflecting the contentious nature of user committees in Andhra Pradesh politics, however, the ECs were discontinued in 2005 after the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) lost the elections in May 2004.¹⁵

¹² SSA was formerly the District Primary Education Programme.

¹³ Initiated in 1998 but revised in 4 April 2002 Government Order Ms. No. 15 to expand functions, especially linking with other community groups and agencies, for example, the *sarpanch*, women councillors, self-help groups, the Department for Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA) groups, etc.

¹⁴ In practice, however, we found that these guidelines were seldom adhered to, for a number of reasons discussed later in the paper.

¹⁵ The education committees were discontinued in 2005 after the tenure of the existing committees came to an end and the new chief minister (elected May 2004) decided against holding new elections for the committees. They were the only user committees to be dissolved following the TDP electoral defeat. Part of the reason was pressure from the teachers' union, which was opposed to local community monitoring. Although the teachers' union in Andhra Pradesh is not a major political force as it is in other states (eg, West Bengal), Jos Mooij argues that teachers resisted the introduction of education committees because they viewed it as yet further erosion of their professional respect and resented demands from an increasingly vocal group of local politicians and parents. However, it is unclear whether their resistance is the reason for the committees' discontinuation. It is likely that broader dissatisfaction with the TDP for having failed to adequately address rural poverty was an equally salient factor. It should be noted, however, that there are still provisions under the SSA programme for parental involvement – through either parent-teacher associations or school management committees.

Our results paint a mixed picture regarding inclusive and meaningful participation in these committees. On the positive side, both key informants and committee members claim that the committees offered a space for participation in public affairs by a broader cross-section of villagers than is the case with other governance institutions. In the case of ECs, as the well-off generally send their children to private schools, participants are often by default from the less advantaged sections of society. Some members also feel that participation in education committees has given them a sense of entitlement and the right to question school authorities and even, potentially, government officials. In several cases, for example, they have continued to monitor education service delivery and to interact with school personnel even after the formal dissolution of the ECs.

A sense of responsibility and commitment comes with being a committee member. I have that responsibility, that's why I am talking with you. Otherwise I could have said that I have other work to do. Even though the committee was formally stopped, I still have that responsibility. (EC chairman, Amrabad)

MCs also offered an opportunity for mothers' closer interaction with *anganwadi* centres and their outreach programme, as the following examples illustrate:

We would share this knowledge [about nutritious food] with neighbours and among ourselves. We would also give suggestions about cleanliness and health care services to people... We would tell each other to send our children to school and provide nutritious food for them. (MC member, Kataram)

The existence of the mothers' committee is very good for us. The children are healthy and the teacher looks after us in a proper manner, as she knows we are going to complain if there are any fraudulent activities taking place. (MC member, Atlur)

These optimistic accounts were far from universal, however. Our findings reveal a number of factors that condition participation in committees:

Socio-economic inequalities

Participation opportunities were significantly shaped by socio-economic, caste and gender differences. Class and caste inequalities were manifested in both direct and indirect ways. First, there was less interest and active participation in committee activities for parents occupied as daily labourers, as participation came at the cost of their daily wage and was thus deemed a less urgent priority than more pressing livelihood issues, as these district-level officials note:¹⁶

It is not the question of their not coming [to meetings], they [MC members] would come but they would say that they are hard working daily labourers so they cannot attend every meeting if they are organised frequently. They also say they can attend if it is compulsory and essential but they cannot attend meetings as a matter of formality. We too had felt that it is genuine. (Child Development Project officer, Karimnagar district)

¹⁶ In their study of village education committees in east India, Corbridge et al. (2005) note similarly that "[t]he idea of participating in a Village Education Committee seemed far-fetched, and perhaps even absurd, to members of families with almost no assets to their name" (145).

They [MC members] are not being paid and how often can they provide free services by missing their daily wage? They are daily wage labourers, so how long can they work without being paid? They don't have any benefits, they are paid only when we organise meetings. (Child Development Project officer, Cuddapah district)

Second, the position of EC chairperson, in particular, seems to be unattainable to most poor parents: the fact that candidates may have to spend considerable amounts of time and money just to be elected is likely to exclude most parents from even considering participation.¹⁷ As the committee is expected to raise funds for the school construction budget, a chairperson's ability to contribute financially to school development is seen as an important asset. Many respondents also mentioned status within the community (due to age, education levels, gender or political party connections) as a desirable attribute for an EC chairperson.

Third, although a reservation system has sought to encourage participation among lower-caste citizens and approximately one-third of committee chairs we interviewed were of either scheduled caste (SC) or scheduled tribe (ST) origins, we nevertheless encountered cases where caste barriers hindered effective participation. For example, none of our case study ECs had a SC chairperson and two out of the four cases (Amrabad and Atlur) had upper caste chairmen although the villages had a majority SC or ST population. Moreover, it was clear in one of these cases that the local entrepreneur would have contested for the local *sarpanch* position, had it not been reserved for Scheduled Tribes. In one of our four village case study cases (Atlur *mandal*) we were also informed of a tense and dysfunctional working relationship between a higher-caste *anganwadi* worker and MC members who were from ST and SC castes. Similarly, a key informant from Amrabad *mandal* attributed the under-investment in child-related services for poor communities in terms of the generally marginalised position of women and lower-caste families.

Because of the petty political culture in the villages, nobody is bothered about the children as they have no voting rights. Women and lower-caste people have never been courageous enough to raise their voice against the upper castes. Elected leaders want to help their followers and are not interested in the marginalised sections and children... When it comes to the backward classes, although they become sarpanch, [elected head of local council] the vice-chairman will be another forward caste person who does all the work. So, the reservations are for namesake only.

Gender differences also affected participation levels. ECs were typically male-dominated and in cases where women were involved, their participation was more likely to be limited, with their husbands handling their responsibilities. This tended to be the case particularly among women with low education levels and/or from Muslim families who often faced restrictions on their physical mobility and on their involvement in public affairs. These difficulties are highlighted in a focus group discussion with female EC members in Atlur about reasons for their lack of interaction with school authorities:

¹⁷ Although the well-off often send their sons to private schools they may still opt for government schools for their daughters. This seems to be a repeated pattern in rural Andhra Pradesh and, as a result, government schools have high girl-to-boy ratios (eg, Galab *et al.*, 2006).

Interviewer: *Why don't you go and meet [school authorities]?*

Respondent 1: *Because they don't invite us and they will invite us only for signatures.*

Interviewer: *Why don't you go and meet them?*

Respondent 1: *Generally we don't go outside.*

Respondent 2: *Our Muslim women don't go outside.*

Respondent 3: *No one is there to accompany me so I won't go alone.*

Educated women, however, faced fewer restrictions and could play active roles in community service delivery. This was particularly the case with a number of MC chairs who were instrumental in improving the outreach of *anganwadi* services. We also came across some active and efficient women members in ECs: in Seethampet and Kataram, for example, former EC chairwomen have since been elected to the local *panchayat*. Both had completed secondary education and one of them came from a politically well-connected family. Nevertheless, as further discussed below, in general women participating in MCs and ECs tended to be less informed and more passive than their male EC counterparts.

Education levels – also mediated through class and caste positioning – played a key role in how involved members were in committee activities. Many respondents emphasised that for committee members to participate effectively and for committees to reach their potential, members should be articulate, educated and knowledgeable. For example:

Yes, [an educated EC chairman] will do it in a better manner. They will be aware of children's education and also about the teachers' way of teaching. (Teacher, Seethampet)

Education in turn shaped members' awareness about committee functions and responsibilities. This awareness deficit was most pronounced in the case of MCs. Many members are illiterate and have little or no awareness of their mandate. For instance, one leader from Amrabad explained:

*They [ICDS officials] have said that I must be the chairperson. They didn't tell me how many years I have to work, etc. They said that if an *anganwadi* teacher resigns and if they want to replace her, I would have to sign the application.*

The process of selecting members for the MCs is considerably less visible than that for the ECs and public meetings are rarely held. In many cases the selection is made by the local *anganwadi* worker, who simply draws up a list of names of eight local women, who may or may not be informed of their membership. The following scenario was common across sites:

There was a madam. She told me that "you have the capability to speak. So, you have to be a leader." They appointed the other members in the same way. At a meeting with doctors and other people, madam introduced us and they entrusted the work to us. There was no election. (MC member, Amrabad)

In the case of ECs, there tended to be a significant divide between awareness levels of the chair and those of the rank and file members. In many committees, the chairperson is the only active participant and generally takes care of committee matters, in co-operation with the school headmaster. In cases where the EC chairmanship was a hotly contested affair between political parties and an important source of political and financial capital for the chair (e.g. Amrabad and

Atlur), committee members were clearly selected only to fulfil a formality and all power remained with the chair. For example, one EC member from Seethampet noted:

Until now we haven't gone [to meetings], as the chairman is looking after it. We don't know anything about it; however, we come to know about things only through him.

These problems of lack of awareness and information were echoed in comments by local service providers, who frequently complained that committees had been unable to realise their potential as the members were uneducated and insufficiently knowledgeable about their sector.

Committee politicisation

In the case of ECs, another barrier to inclusive participation was linked to high levels of committee politicisation in Amrabad and Atlur *mandal sites*. EC chairmanship was a valued position for aspiring local party cadres, particularly in areas with a strong tradition of party political contestation. As a result, the election of the EC committee chairperson tended to be a very visible and politicised event. Typical contenders were men with an affiliation to one of the main political parties, the Congress Party or the TDP, who viewed EC chairmanship as a position of prestige and potentially a stepping-stone for a future career in more influential political bodies, such as the village *panchayat*. In the case of majority SC or ST areas where leadership positions in the local *panchayat* are reserved for these communities, parallel institutions such as the ECs have also provided new leadership positions for upper caste elites who have been excluded from local government institutions by the reservations. Our findings in Amrabad in particular highlight this argument.¹⁸ For this reason, candidates for the chairmanship sometimes spent considerable sums of money in their electoral campaigns and made their political affiliation visible so as to enhance voter recognition. As we further discuss below, an additional motivating force was linked to prospects of money for construction work, as SSA funding includes money for school infrastructure development.

Incentive structures

The incentive structures for participation in ECs and MCs varied significantly. Whereas EC membership – at least for committee chairs – provided not only a potential stepping-stone for a career in politics but also access to considerable funds and hence leverage in decision-making, there were fewer tangible incentives to be actively involved in MCs. MCs are accorded little prestige, owing to the low priority accorded to child and maternal health issues in village politics, and had no access to funds in any of our field sites.¹⁹ Some members had become disillusioned and questioned why they should work as unpaid *anganwadi* assistants. For example, one MC member from Atlur lamented:

We do not get any money for the support we provide to the anganwadi teacher and moreover for attending to this work we lose our wages for that day's work.

¹⁸ Reddy *et al.* (2006) also make this argument.

¹⁹ Although the 2002 Government Order provided for a small amount of seed capital which MCs were expected to supplement with funds that they mobilised at the community level, in practice none of our respondents was aware of or had received these funds.

There was more enthusiasm, however, in sites where members had received training on health and nutrition issues and recognised the value of this knowledge in terms of improving their own and their families' health.

Regarding the personal benefit, we got the complete knowledge on various important topics like health, diet, etc. For instance, if we have an infant or child in our home, we can take care of them based upon our knowledge and also take them for proper vaccinations from time to time. (MC member, Kataram)

Several respondents also noted that they were motivated by the ability to assist local women in accessing much-needed services:

Although some women prefer not to reveal they are pregnant, out of our own concern we find them and bring them to the health centres to get the vaccines. Thus the women are praising the services of the Mothers' Committee and the benefits that they have gained in various areas. Before forming the Mothers' Committee here, this knowledge for pregnant mothers was not very accessible (MC member, Seethampet)

We discuss and take a decision that "her health is not good. So, we have to take care of her." There is an ambulance, we take her to hospital and give her 5,000 rupees money. We give money according to her disease, it is not a fixed amount. We discuss and we take a resolution and we help her. (MC member, Kataram)

Nevertheless, this type of attitude was markedly more prevalent in sites where the NGO, CARE, was working. One local CARE representative pointed out that providing training about the ethics of volunteering constitutes an important part of the capacity building modules for MC members.

Representation mechanisms and accountability

As our discussion above demonstrates, service user committees have not been immune to the formal and informal power structures that often also condition participation and representation in *panchayati raj* institutions. VECs in particular (with access to larger funds than MCs) are sites of struggles for resources and status very similar to local government structures, but there is little evidence that such conflicts of and inequalities in power have sufficiently been taken into account in committee design and implementation. Discourses about direct participation notwithstanding, in practice there is a strong representative element in ECs and MCs as the business of direct participation is undertaken by relatively small groups of four or eight (respectively) elected members. We did not find any evidence of members soliciting the views of other parents about committee activities. Instead the main mechanism for most parents to make sure the committees represent their interests, and those of their children, is through voting at the end of the tenure of each committee. Problematically, however, such committee elections – typically a show of hands in an open meeting - are more open to manipulation than the secret ballot elections of the PRIs, and in a number of cases, especially mothers' committees, elections are simply not held.

Concerns were also articulated about the lack of accountability of the committee to the wider community. Although committees were meant to act as an accountability mechanism in service

delivery, they do not seem to have mobilised sufficiently broad participation so as to be accountable to the parents they were supposed to have served. Moreover, we encountered some accounts of misuse of funds meant for school construction by the chairperson or through collusion between the chairperson and the school headmaster, who are joint committee budget-holders.

Children's voices

Finally, it is noteworthy that while the education and mothers' committees were set up to improve user participation in public services, there are very limited provisions for children's voices to be taken into account in service delivery or their interests represented in committees. The government order states that in ECs that monitor higher secondary schools, the highest-achieving student in Standard 9 would be a member without any voting rights. However, even in this case of rather limited inclusion, we did not find any examples of children's participation in our research sites. Moreover, although some respondents mentioned that the committees represented the interests of children, this was not always how members understood their participation. As EC chairs were frequently concerned about securing their future political advancement, there were greater incentives to focus on activities that would curry favour with the general public of voting age – visible examples of infrastructure development such as construction of compound walls or new school buildings – rather than actions that prioritised addressing children's concerns. When asked directly whether children should be allowed to participate in ECs, the idea seemed rather strange to most respondents. Some expressed concerns that such involvement could jeopardise students' study time, while others feared it could create an uncomfortable atmosphere if children suggested ideas that adults ought to have raised.

Impact on service delivery

Participation in public affairs may legitimately be considered an end in itself, but we are also interested in the impact that user committees have had on access to and the quality and responsiveness of public services. The government regulations for MCs and ECs itemise an ambitious set of goals for these grass-roots institutions, ranging from financial management and infrastructure development to greater parental involvement and responsibility for their children's human capital development, as well as monitoring service provider standards. Although our qualitative methodology does not permit us to make statistical assessments of change over time or to compare the relative merits of user committees with those of other service delivery mechanisms, we focus on a number of themes that emerged from triangulating the data obtained from our interviews with government officers, local service providers, elected officials, parents and children. These include respondents' perceptions of committee effectiveness and the extent to which expectations have been met, as well as the type and quality of linkages committees have been (un)able to form with the community, service providers, government decision-makers and elected officials

Improving service outreach

In committees with active members and/or support from proactive service providers, there was a general consensus that the outreach of local public health and education services had improved. This was particularly the case with active MCs (Kataram and Seethampet *mandals*) where members and key informants were of the consensus that the committees had improved the outreach of *anganwadi* services and increased health and nutrition knowledge within the

community. Many MC members, in fact, considered such extension work, including involvement in government health campaigns such as Pulse Polio, as their main responsibility, as these examples from Seethampet mandal illustrate:

If children are not sent to the anganwadi, the Mothers' Committee will take on the responsibility of informing parents about the nutritious food that is provided, and also its benefits to the children. (Ward member)

We do all kind of activities related to women here. Whatever instructions we get from the anganwadi worker, we follow them accurately. We urge village women to register at the centre and to get vaccinations. (Focus group discussion)

The Mothers Committees are involved in many activities. They feed us with information on ailing people in the village, especially if they might be eligible for government benefits which we handle. Information about such entitlements reaches the beneficiaries through these committees. The committees are involved in everything pertaining to our medical and health schemes. (Anganwadi worker)

As discussed above, however, little demand was generated in committees where members were illiterate and/or poorly informed about their roles and responsibilities, unless their inactivity was compensated for by activist-oriented leaders or *anganwadi* workers.

In the case of ECs, although not as frequently cited as a sign of committee success; infrastructural developments (see below), generating parental demand and commitment to their children's attendance and performance did emerge as an important achievement in Kataram and Seethampet *mandals* where ECs had informed and motivated members. For example, as one Kataram EC member noted:

We would meet with regard to students' issues... as many parents don't have awareness about education. Their children are working and we use to ask them to send their children to school. We also ask them to motivate them in their houses to study well.

Many respondents talked about efforts to persuade parents to ensure their children's school enrolment and attendance, to allow drop-outs to re-enrol and sufficient time for children to do their homework after school. In one EC, members even became involved in regular testing of students to assess their scholastic performance. As a result of awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts by local NGOs in these *mandals*, several informants also mentioned the important role that ECs had to play in addressing problems of child labour, child marriage and child trafficking, as well as HIV/AIDS prevention.

Infrastructure bias

Whereas the role of MCs was largely as an auxiliary to the *anganwadi* teachers because of a dearth of independent financial resources (see further discussion below), an important function of the ECs is to oversee a budget for school infrastructure development, together with the school principal. Thus many respondents when asked about their achievements focused predominantly on improvements in terms of building repairs, constructing classrooms and

toilets, whitewashing classroom walls, and purchasing gifts at national holidays. As one Seethampet EC chair boasted:

We have constructed rooms and we have developed a garden around it and also built a fence. We have made the school a beautiful place and we have seen to that, there are paintings of political leaders and also science diagrams on the walls of the school. Play equipment has also been provided.

This tendency to focus on infrastructure is influenced by several important political factors. First, infrastructural improvements are one of the main functions of local government in India. Second, social sector or child-related issues are rarely (if ever) discussed in *gram sabha* (all-village) or *gram panchayat* (local council) meetings. Instead, development of infrastructure provides an important source of political capital for local politicians, including those initiating their political career as EC chairmen. Although committee members did also talk about their role in ensuring teacher attendance and the quality of teaching, this is clearly a task that has less concrete outcomes, and such achievements are more difficult to demonstrate to the wider community. Third, and probably most important, is the link between construction work and personal financial gain.²⁰ In Andhra Pradesh there is a widespread practice of close linkages between local political leaders and contractors. Committee members (generally less powerful and less active than committee chairs), teachers and school principals openly discussed concerns about corruption within the ECs, as the following examples illustrate:

They [EC chairs] are all the same. They look out for the construction works coming up in the near future and that's all they are bothered about. Nothing regarding education was done. (EC member, Amrabad)

If [the EC] is revived, then they will again seek to demonstrate their authority to us. They will swallow the funds. Now everyone knows that there are many advantages to EC chairmanship even if they don't have education and everyone is coming forward to stand as EC chairman. (Teacher, Kataram)

ICDS can too be critiqued for an over-emphasis on improving coverage, rather than quality of implementation, both in terms of setting up and building new centres and attracting more women to take up services. This is in turn reflected in the mandate of MCs, which were initially established as part of World Bank sponsored public works programme to manage the construction of new *anganwadi* centres and had responsibilities similar to those of the ECs in certain sites with the programme (Gagnolati *et al.* 2005). With MCs' currently more diluted responsibilities, members tend to focus on motivating mothers to visit the centre and raising nutritional awareness. A recent review of child malnutrition in India (*Ibid.*) argues, however, that a greater focus is needed at the grassroots level on children under three, as the first two to three years of life consist of a window of opportunity when long term nutritional outcomes are determined. In addition to pre-school teaching, which tends to by-pass children below three, *anganwadi* workers also focus predominantly on the distribution of nutritional supplements, whereas international empirical evidence indicates that a cross-sectoral approach is required.

²⁰ We are grateful to Jos Mooij and Howard White who both independently raised this point in comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Interventions to improve caring practices, children's health status through referrals to health centres as well as sanitation and overall hygiene all need to be addressed to tackle child malnutrition (*Ibid.*). As we discuss below, for MCs to be able to play an effective monitoring role across this breadth of issues, greater investment in capacity building initiatives will be necessary.

Capacity gaps

Outreach and infrastructural improvements notwithstanding, a considerable number of respondents argued that the committees have not been able to realise their potential at least in part because of members' capacity gaps. As one educated Kataram EC member noted:

Parents of the rich sections can enquire about their children's education. So, the private schools perform better. The parents of the poor children can't do that because they are not educated. So, the performance of the government remains bleak.

Insufficient capacity is hardly surprising given that the committees seek to involve substantial numbers of poor and lower-caste citizens, many of whom are illiterate. The more puzzling question is why more resources have not been invested (by the government, donors and NGOs) in providing complementary capacity-building programmes in order to overcome these structural disadvantages. When respondents were asked to reflect on what would be needed to ensure more effective user committees, the importance of literate participants repeatedly came up, particularly in the context of education service monitoring.

Another important concern raised was a dearth of genuine interest among some participants, either because of ulterior political and/or economic motives (as discussed above) or because of a lack of awareness about the purpose and potential of the committees (especially in the case of many MC members). In this respect it is interesting to note an example of best practice from our fieldwork in Shankarpalli *mandal* by a local NGO, the MV Foundation, which sought to facilitate EC functioning by working directly with members and training them with regard to committee functions and responsibilities as well as providing information on possible alternative sources of funding for school development. Although committee members had also received training from government officials, access to different sources of information equipped them with improved confidence in undertaking their responsibilities and a sense of entitlement to make demands of school authorities.

Lastly, both ECs and MCs are formally responsible for mobilising community funds to support public service development. However, while ECs with well-connected chairs spoke of having secured funding from local politicians for extra school facilities or specialist teachers, none of the MCs we interviewed had been effective at fundraising. The problem would appear to be the disparity between government and donor expectations and the reality of typically poor and poorly connected women seeking funding for a policy issue that enjoys scant political commitment.

Linkages and accountability

Service provider relations

Effective monitoring of teachers and anganwadi workers has proved to be a more demanding task for user committees to tackle than undertaking construction or outreach work. Many committee members were unable to challenge front-line service providers, considering the

latter to be socially and professionally superior to themselves. In a significant number of cases (but especially in the context of MCs), committee members would take action only at the request of the *anganwadi* worker or the school headmaster. As a consequence of low awareness of committee functions and limited leverage *vis-à-vis* service providers and authorities, the committees generally, and MCs in particular, have not had a great impact on service provider accountability. As one MC leader from Amrabad lamented:

How can we check? She comes and goes. We don't bother. Actually, sister should tell me everything but in reality she doesn't share any information with me. She gets my signature but unless she informs me, how can I know?

Even in Gajwel *mandal*, which receives considerable funding and support from the international NGO, CARE, and was the most active of the committees we surveyed, the MC did not perform a monitoring function. The mothers' energies were instead used for awareness-raising among local women and for relieving the *anganwadi* teacher of some of her responsibilities. Although the women here were clearly better informed and motivated to participate than those interviewed in other sites, they were able to improve service provision only through volunteering their unpaid labour, rather than by holding service providers and department officials to account.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the effectiveness and responsiveness of the *anganwadi* centre that we visited in Gajwel seems to be a result of a strong sense of upward accountability on the part of the front-line service providers to their department and INGO staff rather than accountability to their clients. The context of a more effective ICDS, as well as training offered to service providers by CARE, has fostered the *anganwadi* workers' professional commitment and co-operative relationships between the service providers and mothers in general and MC members in particular. The model of co-operative relationships between service providers and mothers making for more effective committees is repeated in our other field sites, suggesting that MCs may have little chance of being effective in case there are not already relatively committed, responsive and accountable service providers.

ECs have had a more mixed impact on teacher accountability. Some argued that user committees – especially because they typically represent the poor and uneducated – are unlikely to carry much weight *vis-à-vis* the teaching profession. For example, as one local Kataram official explained:

Teachers may not care about such private bodies [ie, user committees]. If the government is the authority, then they will work properly.

In several sites with more assertive ECs, we encountered resistance on the part of teachers and headmasters. This may be because teachers were unaccustomed to hearing demands from their pupils' parents or, alternatively, because of true harassment by ill-informed or ill-intentioned committee members:

The ECs have the feeling that they are our superiors and they would always question us wherever they see us, even in the streets. They won't ask us on the school premises and even if we travelled to our home town they question us. Though we are on leave they question us because they don't know about leave entitlements. This questioning is particularly problematic for women teachers. (Female teacher, Kataram)

But other parents believed that before the dissolution of the ECs, teachers' had been compelled to be more accountable to the local community.

Earlier our children used to get better marks because the teachers used to teach properly since they were scared of the education committee but now the teachers are free to do as they want and do not bother about our children. (Focus group discussion with general public, Seethampet)

Advantages due to the absence of the committee means there will be an advantage for teachers. The education committee chairman questions them as a representative of parents of 400 children. If we ask them individually they [teachers] go for protests. Without the committee they don't listen to anybody. Even with the headmaster, they pressure him through the [teachers'] union. (EC member, Kataram)

NGO connections

Overall our results suggest that while NGOs may facilitate inclusive participation and collective action to some extent, such organisations still work within the constraints of existing power structures. As discussed above, NGOs play a positive role in facilitating access to information, about committee functions as well as education and maternal/child health services more generally. In the case of the MV Foundation's work with ECs, this NGO also encouraged collective action more concretely by bringing committee members and parents directly in touch with government officials. NGO involvement had not, however, reversed the general trends that had been documented in the main study sites: political affiliation, wealth and social status seem to have played an important role in the EC chairperson's election, and infrastructure was among the committee's highest priorities in the NGO site like everywhere else.

With regard to CARE's work with MCs, the fact that the international NGO worked directly with and through a government department seems to have further constrained its ability to empower the women participating in the MC to address demands to service providers and officials. CARE's discourse followed the governmental one in its emphasis on women's volunteerism and training modules that aim to teach women about 'volunteer ethics' rather than encourage an approach to hold service providers accountable.

Links with local decision-makers

Our research found only limited evidence of effective linkages between either elected officials or government officers and user committees. Generally our findings endorsed the view that these grass-roots organisations are functioning as parallel institutions and are weakly linked into local political structures.

The panchayat doesn't have any kind of authority on these committees. There is no relation with the sarpanch [local council head]... Sarpanches all over the state are urging that the powers of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment [including decentralisation of social sector management] are transferred to them. (Key informant, Amrabad)

Where there are links they tend to be political rather than substantive – for example, the *sarpanch* was previously the EC chair (eg, Seethampet *mandal*) and used that post as a stepping-stone in their political career, or belonged to the same political party as the sarpanch. This is problematic

not only in terms of a lack of genuine concern for improving education services, but also because it means the committees themselves lack adequate checks and balances against corruption and mismanagement. An equally important problem is the fact that local officials have limited scope to shape service policy. That is, while the rhetoric about user committees focuses on the need for demand-led services by grass-roots clients, in reality the opportunities for real impact on service content and quality are few. Most decisions about education standards, school curricula, teacher training and hiring, etc are made at the national and state levels, or at best the district levels (Mooij, 2006), yet there are no formal communication channels for committee members to articulate their views about these issues. This is particularly concerning given that in our focus group discussions with children, most mentioned that if they had concerns about their school they would envisage communicating their concerns to the local *panchayats*. This again suggests significant dissonance between the idealised forms of civil society activism that are promoted in discourses about grass-roots user committees and their real potential to affect change given their present structural positioning.

Conclusions and policy challenges

Although there have been some clear gains in terms of greater participation among parents in child-related user committees, our findings suggest that a number of important obstacles to inclusive and effective participation remain. Gender and caste reservations notwithstanding, opportunities for meaningful participation are still mediated to a significant degree by committee members' class, caste, gender and political affiliations. These grassroots parallel institutions have had some impact on service delivery for poor children, particularly in terms of outreach and infrastructural development. They have been less effective, however, in shaping service quality and institutionalising linkages with decision-makers who have the power to influence policy development.

Our research highlights that government and donor policies on decentralisation, local governance and public services will need to be revised to shift the focus away from quantity and coverage of committees to the quality of committee work and depth of participation. It is crucial that these challenges are addressed in programme design and implementation as community participation is a key element in donor policy on public service delivery²¹, as well as an important component of the Indian *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* scheme, the forthcoming education bill in Andhra Pradesh and the broader decentralisation process upon which Andhra Pradesh is now embarking.²² In order to realise the potential of parental participation in service delivery and monitoring, the following reforms should therefore be considered:

First, our research underscored the costs of insufficient attention to **capacity-building** at the local level, especially in the context of communities already characterised by significant socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on Molyneux's (1985) distinction between practical and strategic gender needs, we would argue that while poor parents may in the short term prefer that their better-off and more educated neighbours participate more actively in user committees in order to maximise impact on service providers, the tension between inclusive and effective participation can be reduced over time if it is sufficiently taken into account in policy design. This would include ensuring that service users are provided with adequate information about the mandate, roles and responsibilities of these committees; are made aware of critical new legislation designed to enhance grassroots empowerment, such as the 2005 Right to Information Act; and are offered capacity-building opportunities to improve their skills in negotiating confidently with officials and service providers, who are frequently better educated than themselves. Given the positive experiences of capacity building by NGOs that we documented, collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agencies could maximise committees' access to training and information. As Gaventa (2005) argues, citizenship skills do not automatically result from being invited to participate in a policy space, such as these committees, but rather require an often lengthy conscientisation process.

²¹ See for example World Bank, 2003; Gragnolati, 2005.

²² In recent months there has been a firm policy commitment from the Andhra Pradesh Government that District Planning Committees will be established shortly (the relevant Act has been passed in the state assembly) and eight functions for which activity mapping has been completed are going to be brought under the purview of local governments with all functions, funds and functionaries transferred to them

Providing structured opportunities for children to participate and articulate their views could also provide them with a valuable opportunity to develop a fuller sense of citizenship in the longer term, especially in the case of ECs at the secondary school level.

A second important issue concerns **incentives to participate**, which as we have argued are particularly challenging in the context of promoting pro-poor child-related service delivery. Given that the poor need to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of participation, our research highlighted that the low prestige, limited political clout and labour-intensive nature of mothers' committees in particular afforded an insufficiently attractive incentive structure to ensure active participation. Moreover, because of the overly broad mandate of community activities that combine both quasi-extension work and monitoring tasks, there is a risk of overlooking the fact that participatory initiatives couched in rhetoric of 'community', social responsibility or volunteerism may augment mothers' unpaid triple work burden (Batliwala, 2004). This suggests that if governments and donors want village women to undertake an auxiliary role to complement the work of front-line service providers, a small financial incentive may be more effective, as it would enable them to compensate for the loss of daily wage work. The design of stakeholder associations could then focus explicitly on parents' role in monitoring public services for children, with sufficient resources and powers to make a difference to service quality.

In cases where committees offer greater prestige and budget control, such as the education committees, our results caution that these incentives may result in the over-politicisation of committee membership and possible misappropriation of resources unless adequate checks and balances can be established. This underscores the importance of strengthening **committee accountability** mechanisms *vis-à-vis* both parents and representative local councils. Greater transparency regarding committee funding and financial responsibilities would be an important first step to reduce petty corruption and resulting public disillusionment. Stronger linkages and cross-accountability between elected local government bodies and service monitoring associations are also needed, so that committee chairpersons could be held accountable by the wider community, especially when substantial financial resources are at stake. In this regard the proposed reforms in the Andhra Pradesh local government sector would be welcome, including appointing the Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency members as education committee chairs to ensure greater accountability. An additional possibility would be to introduce a grading system for *panchayats* (perhaps overseen by the Institution of Social Audit and Ombudsman) as an incentive to improve their efficiency and accountability, including their contribution to addressing childhood poverty.²³

Our findings also indicate that committees have been less successful at developing meaningful **linkages with authorities**. Parents whose children attend government schools have little confidence or opportunities to challenge local school authorities, let alone politicians or officials. Although some EC chairmen affiliated with the ruling party had close relationships with some authorities and were sometimes able to access funds this way, overall we found few cases where chairpersons had drawn on this political capital to improve child-related services. If this relationship is to be strengthened in line with the theoretical ideal, more structured opportunities need to be provided for all members to interact regularly with local government authorities. One possible window of opportunity to introduce such changes will be through the

²³ Here UNICEF's Child Friendly City Initiative could offer a useful model.

establishment of the District Planning Committees, which will have extensive responsibilities for social policy development and implementation.

Equally importantly, given that education and maternal/child health services remain very centralised in Andhra Pradesh, and in India as a whole, encouraging and facilitating local participation in public services has little meaning if in reality the decisions are taken elsewhere (Mooij, 2006). **Careful devolution** of a wider range of responsibilities to schools, *anganwadi* centres and local governments would encourage greater service user participation. As child-related services are decentralised in Andhra Pradesh, it will be important to make sure that local governments as well as parents are adequately equipped to deal with not only infrastructural development and outreach, but also issues around service quality and service provider accountability. In the case of education committees this would include curriculum development, child protection issues and monitoring of teaching quality²⁴. Similarly, in the case of MCs' role in improving ICDS services, it is critical that members have a better awareness about the importance of interventions for children below three and the impact that caring practices, children's health status and overall sanitation and hygiene have on child nutrition. Lastly, greater local co-ordination is required among child-related services and user committees in order to tap into cross-sectoral synergies, which are critical for tackling the multidimensional problem of childhood poverty.

²⁴ The forthcoming education bill, for example, refers to community knowledge and a community-based curriculum.

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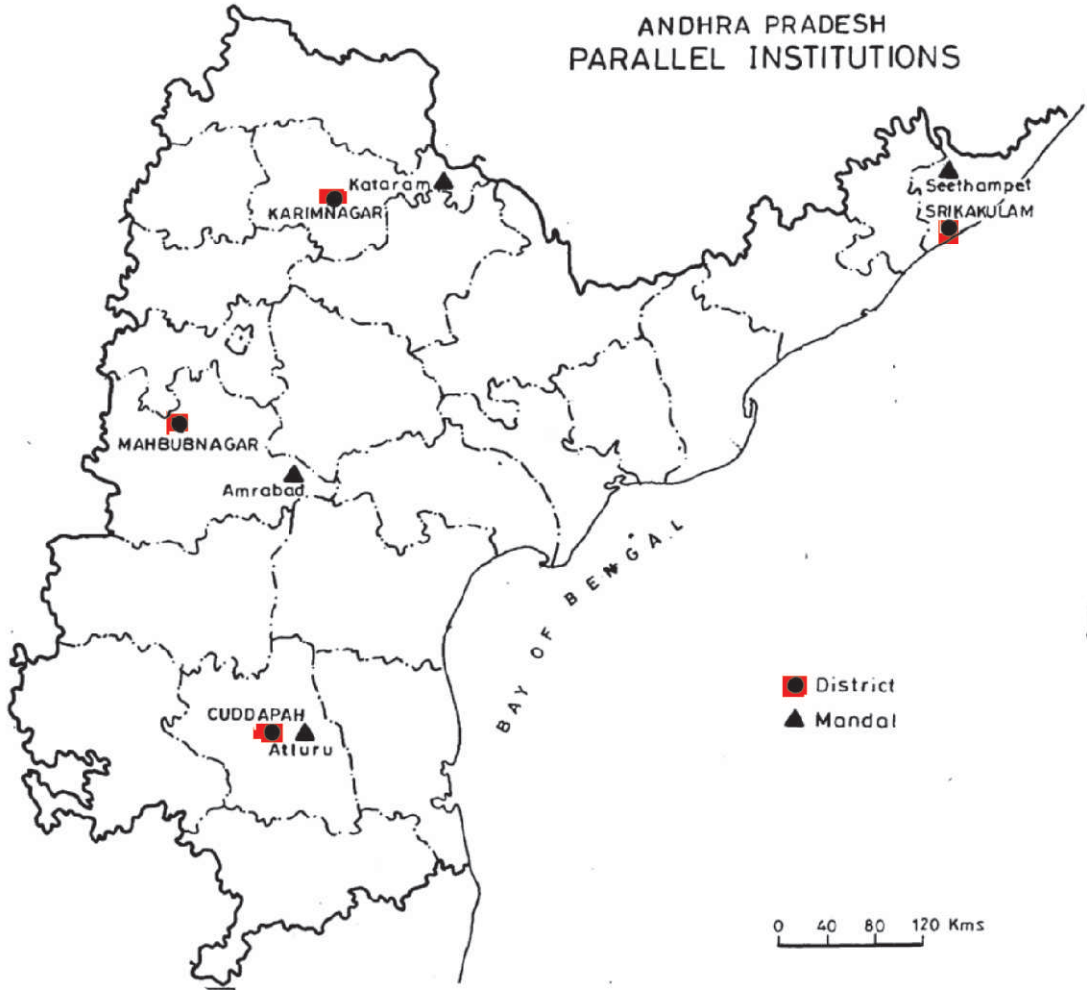
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Appendix 1

Map of research sites



About the Young Lives Project

The Young Lives Project (*Niños del Milenio*) is an innovative longitudinal research project investigating changes in childhood poverty. Over a 15 year period, it traces the lives and fortunes of two cohorts of children growing up in poverty in 80 sentinel sites across Peru, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and India to understand the multidimensional causes and effects of childhood poverty and to influence pro-poor and pro-child policies.

The 12,000 'young lives' participating in the study represent two cohorts, the first born in 2000 and the second in 1994. 8,000 children from the 2000 cohort and 4,000 from the 1994 cohort, along with their primary caregivers, are being surveyed every 3-4 years using a common set of questionnaires translated into local languages and separately targeting the children, their caregivers, and key representatives from their respective communities. The survey intervals are being carefully timed to track the younger children at or following critical childhood thresholds, such as the transition to school and from school to work.

Young Lives explores children's experiences and perspectives on time use, wellbeing, poverty and their social worlds. Gender, ethnicity, disability and other social markers are being studied as mediating factors of poverty at different points in their childhoods. Qualitative approaches, including focus groups, participatory workshops, and semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of children explores in greater depth their own priorities and views of the key issues of the study.

Availability of life course data on the Young Lives cohorts offers a rare resource, spanning infancy through to the early adult years, when significant numbers of study children will themselves become parents. Inclusion of detailed household and livelihoods data for their parents and carers provides a unique insight into factors influencing change in three generations living in poverty – index children, their parents and carers and (eventually) the offspring of the older cohort of children. This will allow for full intergenerational analysis focusing on the reproduction of poverty and the means to prevent its transmission to young lives.

Funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and based on a collaborative partnership between the University of Oxford, Save the Children UK, the Open University and a series of prominent national research and policy institutes in the four study countries, Young Lives' multidisciplinary and longitudinal approach is ideally situated to bridge the gap between research and policy. Ultimately, the project aims to devise a conceptual framework for studying child development and wellbeing in poor country contexts that anthropologists, economists, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists can all sign up to.

