Transparency, Accountability and Participatory Governance
Lessons from people’s movements in India

Course description

This course addresses the core contradiction of contemporary democracy, a system of governance in which “the people” are supposedly “sovereign” but are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in governance. It draws upon major examples of struggles for securing and institutionalising people’s participation in the making of laws and the processes of their implementation. It builds on the lessons offered by such struggles to explore the practical ways in which we can make the transition from a limited notion of representative democracy to a more inclusive vision of participatory democracy.

The perspective adopted is that of postcolonial societies confronting the second generation challenges of democratic governance. In these contexts, economic freedom continues to be denied by powerful transnational financial networks. Political freedom and the aspirations for change of marginalized communities are blocked by entrenched elites backed by authoritarian laws, feudal institutions and corrupt structures of governance. Despite such formidable odds, collective struggles by ordinary people have successfully crafted and legitimised entitlements; forced governments to create delivery mechanisms; and designed procedural safeguards to protect these gains. We will critically engage with the experience of such struggles, specially those around the creation of rights to information and work in India and explore their relevance for the world at large.

This course is particularly relevant for those interested in practical politics, policy design, or social movements as well as those seeking work with policy and governance, civil society organisations, developmental agencies or citizens action groups.

Course organisation

The course is itself an exercise in participation. This means that our individual thinking and reading will constantly have to engage with and contribute to a collective process. This is a weekly seminar; we will meet for one three-hour session per week. Most sessions will include: a) an initial presentation by the instructor/facilitator (30-45m); b) student presentations or a film/video (45-90m); c) group discussion on the theme of the day.

Students will be encouraged to sign up for at least one office hour slot in the semester to allow for a more informal interaction.

Evaluation

Students will be graded on: a) participation in class discussions; b) individual presentations; and c) an end term essay of about 3000 words on a topic to be decided in consultation with the instructor.

Weekly reading required will be roughly 150 pages or its equivalent.