Concept Note: CORD Workshop (October 2012 version)

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Collaboration for Research on Democracy (CORD): building a network on citizen participation, development and democracy in the Global South

Aims and goals

The Collaboration for Research on Democracy (CORD) is a global research network made up of researchers and practitioners working in universities, think tanks, research institutes and NGOs predominantly in the global South. CORD aims to provide a collaborative platform for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to build a policy-relevant research agenda on the new challenges of building pro-poor and citizen-centric development. CORD's activities are conducted in larger, multi-country research projects which bring together researchers and practitioners from diverse contexts. CORD's multi-country and interdisciplinary projects aim to go beyond sharing best practices to developing a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in building successful pro-poor social arrangements and effective citizen mobilization. Through diverse practices of participatory collaboration we aim to achieve:

- the setting of new global and collaborative research agendas on the challenges of citizen-focused development
- the establishment of comparative and inter-disciplinary global research programs and projects
- the generation of new knowledge across diverse contexts in the global South
- the fostering of dynamic engagement between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers

CORD participants include researchers and practitioners from the following institutions and organisations:

- The Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP), Brazil
- The Centre for Policy Research (CPR), India
- The BRAC Development Institute (BDI), BRAC University, Bangladesh
- The University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa
- The University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
- The University of Stellenbosch, South Africa
- The Coady International Institute, St. Xavier Francis University, Canada
- The Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK
- OISE, University of Toronto, Canada
- The Political Science Department, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada
- The Centre for Critical Development Studies, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada

Research and policy agenda

CORD's core research questions are driven by Southern agendas. Under the wider theme of "**Creating Citizenship: the everyday struggles for access and quality**" CORD's members have agreed on three priority research working groups:

- Marginality and Public Policies
- Mapping Knowledge and Democracy in the Global South
- The Dynamics of Extra-Institutionality, Citizenship and Mediation

Starting off from an acknowledgement of the differential nature of citizenship and rights in the global South, the three clusters all aim to research different forms of exclusion and the ways in which citizens mobilize to overcome marginality.

Group 1 - Marginality and Public Policies

Achieving universal citizenship - capable of providing social inclusion and access to rights - has been an unfulfilled promise in many Southern countries. In those contexts, durable inequalities are still key drivers in producing different forms of exclusion and marginality, and thus, in redefining public policies, priorities and shaping contemporary forms of citizenship. There has been a great deal of research conducted on understanding the social implications associated with being part of a marginalized group. However, less time has been spent understanding why it is important to comprehend the effects that marginalized groups may have on political processes.

This group is interested in looking at the gap in the access of universal rights by the marginalized, focusing on the effect of context and strategies used to narrow this gap. The main research questions CORD researchers in this group will ask are:

a) When does marginality matter, politically?
b) When and how does marginality shape public policies?
c) What are the strategies marginal groups employ in order to achieve pro-poor social change?

Some of the sub-questions and themes that this group hopes to explore are detailed below.

Sub-questions and themes:

1) What kind of political environments facilitate the emergence of marginalized communities?

2) What are the various strategies that marginal communities adopt to engage with and instrumentalize networks of power?

3) How do the interactions between the global discourse, state, and the marginalized reconfigure norms of universality? What are the implications for public policy?

4) How is marginality produced and transformed/overcome in particular contexts (cities, peripheries, rural areas, etc.) and what is the impact on democratic engagement and on citizenship rights?

Group 2 - Mapping Knowledge and Democracy in the Global South

(a) What knowledge and knowledge are necessarily for and created through democratic activism? How do these knowledge-creation processes differ in varying local contexts?

(b) What are the pathways for how this knowledge is learned, shared and communicated? How do these pathways challenge conventional explanations on the flows of knowledge about democracy?

The group will follow an iterative process that encompasses the mapping of current practices of democracy, including how individuals (citizens and activists) gain awareness or consciousness about their rights; examine how digital social networks are changing the dynamics of citizen-state relations and driving activism and rights claiming; and use a democratic/participatory methodology to address both of the above, including a user-interactive digital platform and creative visual methods such as digital storytelling; and conduct a literature review. The objectives of this group are to:
- Map more fully the actors involved in knowledge production on democracy
- Use a democratic/participatory methodology to guide questions and responses (user-interactive platform, story mapping, etc.) and to allow activists to reflect on praxis and to network with each other regarding ethical considerations

Sub-Questions and themes:

1) What knowledge is being used and shared and how can a process of democratizing knowledge be enabled?

2) If part of CORD's mission is to be a southern-led platform, what does "southern-led" exactly mean? How can Southern-generated knowledge be mapped?

3) How do southern researchers access their knowledge to build knowledge about democracy and how do they diffuse that knowledge?

4) Is there a pattern found in knowledge networks and digital networks?

Group 3 - The Dynamics of Extra-Institutionality, Citizenship and Mediation

The last few years have seen an increasing recognition that the future of humankind is to be found in cities, and that the dramatic growth of mega-cities, especially in the south, is accompanied by the rise of large populations of the urban poor (Davis 2004). But political decision-making over these spaces and populations is increasingly framed in terms of 'informal governance' based on the recognition that informal institutions and practices play a critical role in poor people's everyday lives (Bayat 1997, Benjamin 2004, Chatterjee 2004). This 'informal turn' criticizes not only northern ideas of 'good governance' on the ground that they are relying heavily on the depoliticized or romanticized notion of 'civil society' (Mamdani 1996,Williams 2004, Benit-Gbaffou 2011); but also deconstructs dominant conceptions of what precisely 'the state' is – especially where governance happens in complex partnerships between government, private sectors and non-governmental organisations.

CORD partners will collaborate to research the various kinds of mediation from democratic forms of advocacy and facilitation through to forms currently covered by terms like patronage, clientelism and local-elite capture. Together they will seek to explore two apparently diverse phenomena that, while not new to the world of politics, appear to have taken on greater salience in recent times. These are what we provisionally term 'unruly politics' – understood as a public rebellion against the rule; and 'mediation' – understood as (often undemocratic) forms of representation of the poor and marginalised by unelected intermediaries. Our hypothesis is that these forms of politics emerge in contexts where formal democratic representation is weak or non-existent, and speak to an underlying lack of legitimacy for mainstream forms of governance, thus creating a space to be filled by alternative and informal forms of politics. CORD partners will develop a framing and language to understand more accurately the various kinds of informal brokering that occur between 'the poor' in pursuing urban public goods, and different parts of the state. In addition to enabling a better understanding of the way in which formal democratic institutions can be hollowed out by informal political practices, a more thorough mapping will allow for an appropriately variegated policy response that is more likely to produce democratic outcomes, including new forms of democratic institution like participatory budgeting (see Baiocchi, Heller & Sliva 2011).

Sub-questions and themes:
1) Mediation and unruly politics reshaping political authority
   o What makes an outcome from mediation binding?
   o How are the political, spatial, economic, and cultural boundaries redrawn and what is their impact on citizenship rights?

2) Types of mediators and practices of mediation that are emerging between formal (state/public authority) and informal spaces in urban/rural settings
   o What is the politics of visualization/recognition?
   o Is the recognition of extra-institutions for redistribution legitimate?
   o What are the ambiguities in the role of the broker/mediator?
   o What questions does it raise in terms of legitimacy and representation?

3) Forms of unruly politics that exist or have emerged and how they impact regimes and the shaping of new forms of government and democratic politics
   o Under what conditions does some sort of mediation coexist with unruly politics?
   o What is new about unruly politics and in what contexts does it emerge?
   o What is the impact on democratic practice and on democratic outcomes?

4) Agency, mobilization, activism in achieving substantive citizenship
   o Are disruptive tactics more likely to bring about pro-poor policy change than more moderate tactics?
   o How can new spaces for agency be created, consolidated, and expanded in resiliently restricted environments?
   o How do you talk about agency in relation to political regimes that are path dependent?
   o What is the causal importance of digital social media in promoting and sustaining mobilization in fragmented social environments?
   o Can we channel this into something productive?

Background and timeline of CORD's previous activities

Over the last two decades, the idea that citizen engagement and action can contribute to improved governance and pro-poor development outcomes has become an accepted part of the policy discourse. Pro-poor social change as a result of citizens' struggles against durable inequalities and through new democracy-building strategies are increasingly evident in both transitional and already democratized countries. Yet there is still a great need to better understand how these citizen-centric strategies work and how we actually assess the wider democratic impact and developmental outcomes of citizen-initiated social mobilization.

CORD was thought to provide a new impetus and platform for researchers and practitioners interested in the dynamics of democracy and development in the Global South. Many of them had already worked together in a ten-year research and policy network, the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (CDRC)[1].

Upon completion of CDRC, researchers agreed that future research needs to focus on the quality and direction of the differences that citizen participation can make, and how they are attained. Often this type of research is best conducted in larger, multi-country research networks, which bring together researchers and practitioners from different contexts. These types of multi-context collaborations can go beyond merely sharing best practices to developing a deeper and more complex understanding of the conditions under which successful pro-poor democratic mobilizations and social arrangements work across different contexts.

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[1] For more information on the projects, please see: www.citizenship-drc.org

Since early 2011, online exchanges among potential collaborators have contributed to setting up the network. June 2011, the CORD co-ordination committee organized its first four-day online conference in order to identify potential areas for future collaboration, with almost 30 researchers from all around the globe. Some of the cross-cutting research themes mentioned to be explored were:

- Engaging citizens and states in building pro-poor social policies
- Understanding the role of citizen participation and social mobilization in informal social arenas
- Understanding the challenges of global research collaboration and new BRICS-led development initiatives

A second online conference was held in March 2012. "Defining the Global South" was the chosen topic for this "Coming Up for Air Online Conference" - a discussion forum among CORD members for theoretical, methodological and analytical exchanges.

CORD's first face-to face meeting happened in May 2012, in Toronto, Ontario to share current projects, explore potential common research agendas and discuss funding priorities for the network. This initiative brought together approximately fifteen experienced researchers and practitioners from Brazil, Bangladesh, Canada, Egypt, India, South Africa and the United Kingdom for a three-day workshop hosted by the International Development Studies Program (now Centre for Critical Development Studies) at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

The short-term output of the workshop was the development of a comprehensive proposal on the development and strategic directions of CORD. The workshop also resulted in the development of a knowledge dissemination portal and social media platform on issues of citizen participation, development, inequality and governance.

CORD's second face-to-face meeting will be held in India, in December 2012. During the workshop hosted in New Delhi by the Centre for Policy Research, CORD will build on the research agenda developed during the past year and reach out to new partners, notably those based on the region. Participant's collaboration will result in:

- An edited volume on mediation and unruly politics
- The design of a research process of mapping practices and actors involved in knowledge production on democracy
- The creation of a user-interactive digital platform, as well as creative visual methods such as digital storytelling and a link to the existing CORD website
- Working papers, journal articles and opinion pieces in national newspapers.