

The Significance of Meaningful Participation

The Story of Gandhi

The first image that comes to the minds of many people when the country of India is mentioned is that of the leader of the Indian independence movement – Mahatma Gandhi. Across India, the nation’s citizens celebrated Gandhi and chose to join him in his cause. Employing nonviolent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence from British rule in 1947. Nonviolent civil disobedience was championed by Gandhi as a way to challenge the British colonists by taking a defiant stance, but without resorting to violence. Instead of violence, Gandhi encouraged his followers not to attend any gatherings organized by the colonists, accept British education, buy any British products, or wear British outfits; rather, individuals were encouraged to replace these elements of colonialism with those that supported an independent Indian identity. The revolutionary ideology he created has since inspired other civil rights activists across the world, including Nelson Mandela, who ended apartheid in South Africa, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who advanced the civil rights movement in the United States.

Gandhi freed India from Britain’s 190-year-long colonial rule over India with his non-violent ideology, and has served as the inspiration for national and international civil society movements around the globe. One may ask how Gandhi began this historic movement.

Everyone in an organization is an expert in some way. Everybody should have the opportunity to participate meaningfully.

Did he mobilize the public to join in demonstrations? Did he lobby the government? Did he give large-scale public speeches?

The answer is none of the above. His first step was going to the smallest villages and organizing peasants – everyday people – to clean up their own surroundings. Upon returning to his homeland after studying abroad, Gandhi was struck by the poor hygiene in India, so he mobilized the villagers to begin local clean-up efforts. People started to develop an awareness for their environment and also for the fact that, small as their contribution was, they could make notable changes and improvements. By starting small to encourage participation at the local level, Gandhi’s approach created opportunities for Indians of all types to participate in a much larger struggle. In recognition of this, on Gandhi Memorial Day in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a nationwide “Clean India” campaign to commemorate this great leader.

“Human rights begin at home.”

Today, the idea of meaningful participation is the foundation of Asia Catalyst’s idea that “human rights begin at home.” Before we can bring change to society as a whole, we first need to model the changes that we want to see within our own families, communities, and organizations. From this comes the concept that before conducting advocacy to change our cities, provinces, or our country, we first have to make sure that our organizations reflect the changes that we want other people to make. One way we do this is by giving everyone – from community members, to staff, to the person who cleans our office – an opportunity to meaningfully participate in our work.

Meaningful participation in the field of public health

Asia Catalyst works to protect the rights to health of Asian marginalized communities. Most of our community-based organization (“**CBO**”) partners are

from health-related fields. Therefore, in the coming section, we will look at meaningful participation in the field of health and through this example see its significance and commonality in practice.

The GIPA Principle

The Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV and AIDS (“**GIPA**”) is a principle that aims to realize both the rights and responsibilities of people living with HIV (“**PLHIV**”), including their right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives and the right to self-determination. AIDS activists have fought hard to have a voice and to be able to participate in designing the policies and programs that impact their life and treatment.

Please recall an experience where a policy or program that affects your life was formulated without your participation or input. What was the situation like? How did it make you feel?

The idea of greater involvement of PLHIV was first voiced by PLHIV in Denver, the United States, in 1983, and the GIPA Principle was formalized at the 1994 Paris AIDS Summit, when 42 countries agreed to support the movement.

“Nothing about us without us”

This slogan was first used more than 500 years ago. It was the political motto that helped establish Polish constitutional legislation that transferred governing authority from the monarch to the parliament. It subsequently became an axiom of democratic norms, adopted in the American Revolutionary War and used as a principle of Hungarian law and foreign policy. In the 1990s, “nothing about us without us” came to be associated with the disability rights movement. Eventually, the slogan became popular among other marginalized communities, including sex workers and PLHIV. The motto is built upon the principle of meaningful participation. For decades, disability groups utilized the phrase in their movement to strive for equal participation in social matters. Now it has

become a unifying call for people around the world who are fighting for the right to participate in the programs and policies that affect their lives.

Meaningful participation has been evidenced in many types of activities. For example, inclusive courses for people with disabilities, a barrier-free society, and anti-discrimination laws aimed at universal access to services and public lives.