Speaking Truth to Power – the COPASAH Global Symposium 2019

Raising the slogan, “Our rights, your accountability,” right to information activist from India, Aruna Roy, set off the COPASAH Global Symposium 2019 to a rousing start while delivering the keynote address at the symposium’s inaugural on October 15 in New Delhi. Saying, “Today we’re all here to speak truth to power, as accountability is nothing else but speaking truth to power,” Roy stated that social accountability is the next step that takes forward the citizens right to information.

The Community of Practitioners on Accountability and Social Action in Health (COPASH) global symposium from October 15-18 on ‘Citizenship, Governance and Accountability in Health’ brings together 500 delegates from 40 countries in Latin America, Europe, Sub Saharan Africa, Eastern and Southern Asia. Organised collaboratively by the People’s Health Movement and others, its aim is to strengthen the linkage between communities and the health system to provide quality and accountable care. The theme of the symposium is ‘Leaving No One Behind – Strengthening Community Centred Health Systems for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals.’

At the first plenary on October 16, this global community of health practitioners working on social accountability and community action, focused on connecting the global to the local. Moderated by Anuj Kapilashrami of UK’s Queen Mary’s University and Abhijit Das of India’s Centre for Health and Social Justice, the plenary discussed issues ranging from the marketisation of healthcare to health as a right and the nature and meaning of being a citizen in a world that is now globalised to the absolute grassroots reality of manual scavengers in India. The plenary brought out what the conference was about and whom it is for - people who connect the grassroots through overarching concepts of valuing humans as intrinsically valuable, individual and free. The mix of diverse panelists - Moses Mulumba, CEHRUD, Uganda, Rajat Khosla, WHO, Geneva, Jonathan Fox, American University, USA, Bezwada Wilson, Safai Karamchari Andolan, India, and Sowmya Kidambi, SSAT, India – connected the vast global discourse about citizenship, governance accountability and human rights with the intensely local details of community activism, bringing out the work of trying to move governance back to system-building from where it has been captured by the market. They spoke about the work in the area of citizenship, fighting to re-capture its meaning in a world where many of the problems are global and 14 % of the global population is stateless and many others are relatively stateless because of marginalization and exclusion. They stated that the struggle is to re-make the meaning of ‘citizen’ to mean ‘a person having an executive role in the decision making systems around her/him.’ To achieve this, the challenge was working to make decision-making bodies accountable to the people for whom they make decisions and not vice versa. Re-capturing meaning is a big part of our work, stated the plenary.

The clarion call of the symposium came from Wilson who said, “Accountability is usually seen as accountability to those more powerful and above you, but our challenge is to get the powerful seeing themselves as responsible to all, especially the most vulnerable ‘below’ them.” Summed up Molumba, “We’ve gone from system building to problem solving to marketisation,” even as Kidambi exhorted, “If spaces are shrinking, but we have a foot in the door, let’s use all our strength to push it open.”
The rest of the sessions during the day focussed around methods and tools such as rights based approaches, social accountability, social audits and transparency of information to build people-centred systems. In the session on one of the key themes of the symposium - community action and accountability in health system strengthening - social accountability emerged as a key method in strengthening health systems and improving the communication between communities and their services. “I have a much better understanding of mine and my community’s human rights specifically the patient’s rights, I know all the local leaders and their responsibilities now,” said health worker Kabanda David from CEHURD, Uganda, speaking of locating community action within an accountability framework. Diunugalage Lalith Senarathna of Rajarata University in Sri Lanka shared, “Many women cried that teenage pregnancy insulted their village, they said they have a good village but the problem is the few girls who tarnish the name of the village. Without addressing this victim blaming nothing else would work, we know now.”

In the session focussing on the second key theme of the symposium on health services for indigenous, excluded and vulnerable communities, the various problems faced more by this group of citizens than by others was discussed, and also how to overcome the problems. The session was in a sense a specific example of widening the meaning of being a full citizen.

The session based on the symposium’s third theme of advancing the agenda for sexual and reproductive health rights, looked at the hierarchies in communities, while discussions based on the fourth theme of people centred accountability of private and corporate health sectors, explored the role and function of the private sector and how the work is being done to reset the narrative, recapture meaning and space from them and giving control back to legitimate decision-making bodies. In the fifth key symposium theme of forging alliances between the community and health care workers, the discussions were on the grassroots level of how to support those real people who are at the cutting edge of health delivery for their communities, and how to re-set their relationships with the communities around them and the ‘higher’ authorities who should be listening to them.