When and How Does Voice Matter?
And How Do We Know?

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to complicate our understanding of voice in development. It proposes that while it is important to consider not just voice, and the processes of valuing voice, it is also important to understand what voice and agency mean in the complexities of everyday life for populations who are marginalized or disadvantaged. The chapter draws on research in an Indian slum cluster to illustrate how an ethnographic approach can help us to appreciate these complexities and problematize notions of voice. It explores examples of the ways in which people seek to remain unheard and invisible in official and formal terms, and suggests ways that we can rethink what voice might mean in development. While communication for development and social change cannot simplify complexity, it does provide a way of facilitating participation in the design of development. It can highlight the contestations and different perspectives involved, and can draw attention to the relationships of developers and people in development contexts.

Keywords: voice, agency, everyday life, ethnography, development, complexity

On a cold January morning in 2012, in the run up to the Delhi Municipal elections a candidate led a political rally headed for the Govindpuri slums. Slum dwellers are important 'vote banks' and there are several ways in which candidates seek to gain their support, many involving financial incentives of some sort. In this particular instance the candidate halted at the entrance to the slums because a group of women from the slums were clustered around a woman's body. The body was dressed in white, covered in a white cloth, and laid out on a bamboo mat used to carry the dead, in the middle of the road. Blocking the road, the women were loudly wailing, and seemingly unaware and un-listening to the candidate and his supporters trying to negotiate a way past them in order to enter the slums. The wailing was intense and relentless. The women were unmovable. It was unthinkable to interrupt them in their grief and so the candidate and his rally bypassed the Govindpuri slums.

Having a voice, in a way that matters, requires attention to both processes of voice and the valuing of voice:

For 'voice' is about more than just speaking and the growing incitements to speak. An attention to voice means paying attention, as importantly, to the conditions for effective voice, that is, the conditions under which people's practices of voice are sustained and the outcomes of those practices validated (Couldry 2010: 113).

This is, on the surface, an example of slum-dwelling women expressing themselves vocally, and their voices being recognised and valued. Their wailing was not interrupted; no attempt was made to silence them as their grief was clear to all. They were listened to.

However, on closer inspection, the interpretation of what actually happened here needs to be complicated. In fact, once the political rally had re-routed, the women packed up, the apparently dead woman recovered herself receiving great praise for her acting abilities, and they all walked home in a cheerful mood. They had achieved their objective – on behalf of a local candidate in the Municipal elections – to halt the opposing candidate's rally and therefore his efforts to gain votes from within the Govindpuri slums.

The story above is from the ethnographic research of Tripta Chandola (2010, 2012, 2013a, 2014), which she refers to in her telling of this particular story, as "a listening of the inside" (Chandola 2014: 213). Such examples require us to complicate our understandings of voice as process and valuing. Voice can be, as we have seen here, strategic, manipulated, manipulating, and it has many depths that cannot be understood sufficiently at a superficial level – some of which I go on to explore below.

Complicating voice

This chapter is concerned with the need to complicate the ways in which we understand and research voice within development, and advocates an ethnographic approach to research and a participatory approach to communication for development. The growing dominance of project planning cycles and results-based management in development over the past twenty years has significant implications for how notions of progress, social change and participation are understood and how and why concepts such as voice matter. In many cases in development, 'voice' is used implicitly as a proxy for participation, representing something that can be valued by development agencies as a basic human right. However, how voice is thought about and applied needs to be further understood. It is not necessarily equivalent to a rights-based approach to development.

My argument draws upon ten years of ethnographic work by Chandola, many of them in collaboration with the author, in the Govindpuri slums of Delhi.[1] This work shows that we need to complicate how we think about voice, how voice is experienced in development contexts, and the implications for development interventions. What are referred to here, and colloquially, as the 'Govindpuri slums' are in fact a cluster of three slums, Bhumhiheen, Navjeevan and Nehru camps, that are situated next to the legal settlement named Govindpuri. These three slums emerged in the 1970s and are very densely populated with limited infrastructure. They are spread over an area

of five square kilometres, with an average of around 600 families living on every hectare of land (Chandola 2012). The slums are illegal settlements, and while residents might own or rent their house (constructed of brick, or more temporary materials including plastics and corrugated iron), they have no right to the land on which the homes are constructed, and have throughout the years faced the sometimes urgent threat of demolition.

Ethnography is proposed as a way to focus on a complex understanding of voice in development, one that challenges development's relatively static and often externally imposed classificatory structures and frameworks. The argument is that we need to engage with concepts such as voice as they emerge and are lived. Ethnography can help us to understand complexities, different contexts and classifications, cultural localities and meaning structures; it produces rich qualitative research to help us understand how voice matters, and by extension how and why participation in development matters. This dovetails with arguments for the need for "multiple voices and interests in the design, implementation and evaluation of development policy" (Manyozo 2012: 9) and the importance of communication for development and social change "to influence and transform the political economy of development in ways that allow individuals, communities and societies to determine the direction and benefit of development interventions" (Ibid.). Only then can voice as a concept be used in development efforts in meaningful ways.

Key framing issues in development

Development is an area of actions where preconceived categories and classifications can overly determine research and evaluation (Lennie & Tacchi 2013; Slater 2013). This is unsurprising, since development as a political and socio-economic aspiration and as a field of funded activities, is an effort engaged in by nations and multinational agencies, in relation to globally agreed agendas and protocols. The ways that these agendas shape how development is understood as well as efforts to progress it have been extensively critiqued both in relation to development as a whole (i. e. Escobar 1995), and through particular institutional examples (i. e. Ferguson 1990).

While there is growing pressure from donors to demonstrate accountability and value for money through mainstream impact evaluation, there is an equally strong emphasis on partnerships and local ownership as well as good governance (Dabelstein 2003; Mosse & Lewis 2005). We know from ethnographic work that despite the fast pace of change associated with new digital media and communication technologies, the drivers of social and cultural change, including structured gendered relations, are embedded in deeper, slower and complex social and cultural transformations (Coleman 2010; Tacchi, Kitner & Crawford 2012; Tenhunen 2008).

The role of media and communication in development, according to Manyozo, is to provide contestation that draws attention to participation, policy and power. Its role

"is to offer a platform where people can contest both political and economic power to enable them to transform specific development systems to their benefit" (Manyozo 2012: 10). This involves challenging ideas about development itself, because development institutions "operate with assumptions, values, and concepts, which are shaped in conjunction with historical and material forces. These are not comprehensive, monolithic, or held equally by all" (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 27).

Some key oppositional categories and concepts are often used as positioning devices by agencies, practitioners and scholars (Tacchi & Lennie 2014). These could be seen as competing binaries, including:

Forms of development:
- top-down instrumental; bottom-up participatory

Approaches to development:
- results-based management; learning-based and emergent

Theories of change:
- Linear, planned and predictable; complex, locally defined and unpredictable

On the one hand, a participatory and engaged approach to understanding development contexts and concepts can lead us to understand complexity and uncertainty, but this makes notions of planning for results difficult and sublimely contextual, when the dominant frameworks of development demand that technical solutions are sought and applied that can be spread and scaled up.

Development unavoidably contests different ways of knowing and experiencing. The emphasis on development planning and on the role of technical expertise as value free and unassailable denies this contestation (Crewe & Harrison 1998, Mosse 2013), which communication for development can make visible, and actively encourage (Manyozo 2012). Development has been largely characterised by a privileging of disembodied and rationalist models of behaviour and expertise. Economist William Easterley writes in his book *The Tyranny of Experts* (2013) about a "technocratic illusion" whereby poverty is thought to exist because of a shortage of expertise rather than a shortage of rights. He argues that technical problems are a symptom of poverty, whose cause is the absence of political and economic rights. He calls for a move away from what he characterizes as authoritarian development, towards free development.

All of this has implications for our understanding of what counts as knowledge and 'expertise' and for people's sense of agency in the world. Gender researcher Ineke Buskens is concerned with our lack of critical attention to the frameworks we use for constructing knowledge in the field of ICT (information and communication technology) for development. She suggests that while it's appropriate to focus on recognising and working to increase the agency of the beneficiaries of development, the agency of those who set the agendas is largely ignored – we need to make it highly visible, because, "[a]lthough their [donors, practitioners, researchers, scholars] agency may be less visible, and definitely under less scrutiny, their frames of mind impact directly

the way meaning is made of Southern women's experiences, dreams, and perspectives in the context of human development, poverty, and ICTs" (Buskens 2010: 19). One could say that while the emphasis is on the agency and voices of the intended beneficiaries of development, the agency and voices of the developers are paid no attention even though they drive activities and frame the conditions of engagement with said beneficiaries. We need to reflect more on this relationship.

This resonates with the notion of "travelling rationalities" that reinforce the new expert consensus on how to eliminate poverty, which nevertheless is subject to a growing demand for accountability, which itself entrenches expertise (Mosse 2013). Travelling rationalities are generally applied, "framed by the universal logic of the new institutional economics (rules/incentives) and law (rights/accountability/transparency)" (Mosse 2013: 4). The universal is asserted "over the particular, the travelled over the placed, the technical over the political, and the formal over the substantive" (Craig & Porter 2006: 120 quoted in Mosse 2013: 4). Expertise is centralized, and this inevitably shapes how development thinks about and defines what participation is, and when, how and why 'voice' matters.

Strategies of exclusion

Chandola, in her essay "I wail, therefore I am" (2014) focuses on the voices (or lack of) of the women in the Govindpuri slums. In general the women's voices in the highly gendered soundscapes of Govindpuri are "at best, muted" but one "sonic performance by women in Govindpuri ... has the potential to disrupt the intersecting sonic, spatial, and gendered masculine hierarchies, however temporarily: it is that of a wailing woman" (2014: 214). The power of this particular "sonic performance" is clear from the story above, where the women's voices were valued. One could see this as an example of double valuing, since the candidate and his supporters are from outside the slum. To those outside the slums, especially the media, officials and the middle class residents that neighbour the slums, the sounds and soundscapes of slum dwellers are generally heard and categorised as polluting, as "noise", as nuisance. The categorization of the sounds of the slums and slum dwellers as noise "is effectively employed to create social, moral and political exclusion" (Chandola 2012: 392). The way the women were mobilized to halt the political candidate demonstrates clear understanding of the need to strategically utilize a particular and unassailable expressive form and dramatic staging. Alternative efforts by such women to halt the rally might have at best been ignored, at worst attracted violence.

The material conditions that people experience lead them to strategically manage their lives and representations according to their particular conditions and context. This is not necessarily visible to development agencies seeking to promote voice. Indeed, many people might desire a lack of attention and a lack of recognition. This raises questions about the applicability of concepts like voice, the idea that giving

people a voice is always and straightforwardly positive, and signals a need for deeper understanding of when, how and why voice matters, as well as when invisibility and lack of formal listening is a necessary condition for survival. The notion of political voice in Govindpuri slums is even more complicated, given their value as vote banks and the consequent value of their vote, which can readily be sold. For example, in recent political campaigning, some Muslims living in the slums "sold" their votes to Hindu nationalist parties (although some of the people observed doing this denied that they would actually cast their vote in this way on election day). This is not to suggest that this is always the case, and that political engagement in formal politics is non-existent, but it is fair to say that it is complex.[2] Certainly the slums are both highly political and politicised spaces.

One of the themes that emerged early on in the ethnographic fieldwork in the Govindpuri slums was that of "strategic exclusion". We saw that certain structural factors, including gender, land ownership, employment and caste, significantly affect the levels of inclusion and exclusion that people experience, and along with this their access to and strategies towards information, services and communication technologies. We became aware of the necessity to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion as complex, shifting and negotiated. While some structural factors such as gender and caste are relatively fixed, negotiations and exceptions to well-established norms take place nevertheless, while other factors such as employment, health and land ownership are intricately bound up with the former.

In order to explore this we considered social inclusion and exclusion as it manifests itself in everyday lives at three levels – structural (access to social, economic and technological facilities and utilities, whether formal or informal, legal or illegal), social (caste, gender, income, mobility, welfare, social networks) and strategic (the crossing of boundaries and instrumental use of structural and social categories). This helps to appreciate the negotiated aspects of the manifestation of strategic exclusion in everyday lives. We used the concept of the social exclusion framework to explore strategic inclusion and exclusion which plays with structural and social inclusion and exclusion in ways that reflect on a deeper understanding of dynamic practices and processes and which brings a higher degree of agency into the discussion. The people encountered through fieldwork are, after all, social actors rather than passive subjects.

Life in the slums

There are a range of individuals and family groups living in the slum cluster, and for a variety of reasons. Most of the populations characteristic of urban slums come to the city to look for job opportunities to escape severe economic constraints or to earn money to pay crushing debts. For many the slums offer an environment where they can engage in economic activities that would be closed to them in the places that they moved from; for example, men working in jobs that would not be acceptable according

to their caste and other social structures at home, and for women, the ability to work outside the household for economic gain. But differences in the migratory patterns are important because while in the case of most households, the migration is undertaken essentially because of severe economic and social constraints in their home, the reasons for moving to the slums for some can be far more strategic, enterprising and intentional: reducing their expenditure on rent in other localities; squatting land in the slum settlement in order to claim their own legal land in a resettled colony in the future; or strengthening existing employment or business opportunities. Many of those we met demonstrated clear aspirational motivations, albeit making the most of the limited opportunities available to them, and it is these households that are discussed here.

The most well established households in these terms have been living here for a considerable period of time, some having shifted to the Govindpuri slums in its initial period of settlement in the 1970s because the slums offered a far cheaper living possibility than neighbouring legal settlements, and, there was an entitlement to compensation in the form of land in a resettlement colony. This means that those who have been recognized as having "claimed" space in the slums are entitled, when the slums are cleared, to a piece of land in a resettlement colony. This entitlement to resettlement requires forms of registration, and they are finite, and in some cases identities as well as brick and mortar homes have been exchanged in order to ensure the entitlement is part of what has been bought. Given the longevity of the Govindpuri slums, many inhabitants have been here for many years.

One example is Mahesh's household. He came to Delhi in 1994 and managed to buy a house, open an STD-booth (telephone booth) and has since dabbled with many other professions and businesses. His is a "success" story of a villager with few options optimizing the opportunities offered by the city and the slum cluster. Living here, he is able to operate businesses, save money and send his children to good schools outside of the slums. All the households mentioned here explain their slum dwelling status in terms of the opportunities it offers – to establish and maintain status and the ability to plan and work for a better future, precisely because they live in the Govindpuri slums which allows them to enjoy certain exemptions like land rent and the payment of taxes. Living in the slums brings down the cost of living in the city drastically. Being in the slum area, they are automatically issued ration cards and officially recognised as belonging to the *Below Poverty Line* category, which exempts them from paying taxes. This means that Mahesh does not pay commercial tax on the shops or other businesses he has in the slums.

Another example is Meera's household, who live in a three-story house which was initially referred to as a gift from a family member. In fact, a relative of Meera's father-in-law is registered as living on this piece of land in the Govindpuri slums, but he lives outside in a legal colony. He needed someone to stay in the Govindpuri slums to be able to claim the resettlement land he was expecting to be offered. It has been more than 25 years now, and the house and the prospect of resettlement rightfully belongs to him. Although the land in the slums is not straightforwardly 'owned' by its settlers,

they use their habitation of that land as a token for land that will later come their way when the slum dwellers are resettled. As habitation of land is the only claim to it, the camps are densely populated, with all once vacant spaces occupied swiftly, and in some cases encroachment into neighbouring areas or pavements and roads (though these have regularly been cleared, with no relocation offered).

In most of these households, more than one member has a regular job such as in an office or factory, or they own some form of stable business. The assets possessed by these households are similar to poorer households outside the slums, as they have access to basic facilities. They have a toilet within the house, a separate kitchen and running water, although water is often shared by a few houses (Chandola 2013b). These households strategically engage and disengage with formal systems and processes depending on the need for visibility and voice, or its inverse, invisibility and lack of recognition.

Amongst the concerns of these households are future security (they are generally forward thinking, aspiring to and planning for better lives for their children), getting a good education for at least some of their children, and ensuring business and/or employment security and improvement. Their location within the local social networks is deeply embedded, exercising some degree of influence in some areas of decision making at the very local level. This kind of aspiration for the future, with its referents to what is possible in the slums, being far away from the many constraining structures of their homes, needs to be understood in cultural and social as well as economic terms (Appadurai 2014).

While the majority of these households do not have bank accounts, they generally do have savings (not declared to any officials), which are circulated within the community through an informal network of associations called chit funds. Under this scheme, people who know each other form a group within the community and deposit an amount of money to a designated person each month. The workings of a chit fund are similar to that of an official Self Help Group, except the money circulates informally and depends on understandings of mutual benefit, and trust. Members of a chit fund can draw on their savings but also ask for a loan. One of these chit funds is managed by Mahesh. Within this savings and debt network these people can both raise debts on the basis of their cohesiveness within the social network, and ensure economic cushioning in the form of savings. None of this is visible outside of the chit fund members, and none of it reported officially. Informal social support networks such as chit funds and other social support mechanisms are crucial to a household's sense of security and wellbeing. Strategic exclusions from formal society emerge as important choices for some groups, who nurture, and sometimes thrive from informal (and sometimes illegal) networks. Social networks can be more important than official recognition. How development interventions can support those who are excluded from such networks is an important question for communication for social change.

There is relatively strong cash flow circulation within this section of the slum population. These families are able to cushion themselves from crises because they are

able to appropriate the advantages of staying within the slums and thereby increase their prospects for both immediate sustenance and future sustainability. If they lived in legal colonies they would not be able to live with such security and would not be able to improve the prospects of their children (ultimately aimed at owning legal land, receiving good education, and maintaining good and stable employment). In this way, living in the slums now, ensures a better future for the family; it is a form of strategic exclusion.

These families with their relative social and economic stability have been able to sustain their social and cultural values and attitudes, though these have undergone transformations and digressions. This is very situation specific and because they (social and cultural values) are implemented in a context outside where they came from – villages, small towns and communities with strict social expectations – this can create both anxiety and freedom from constraints. For example, in these households, women who are widowed are able to work in ways not otherwise sanctioned, break ties with extended families, and with this, break from gendered responsibilities and commitments (Tacchi 2014). They are able to operate in ways that break down gender roles, which they nevertheless expect their daughters to observe – they are working to create a situation where their daughters will be able to conform to the social and cultural norms that they have been able to strategically disobey, for the sake of their immediate family's future.

A strong apologetic sense of belonging to the slum area is also very prominent within these families. Mahesh constantly talks in terms of being part of the "other", legal community by reiterating that his children attend the best public school in the area, and that he could shift anytime from the slums, but does not, because his wife has not yet found a house that she feels is suitable for them. At the same time, he justifies remaining in the slums as due to a sense of responsibility for other members of his village – extended family – who he is supporting at the moment, and who he would not be able to support if he were to move out of the slums.

Social inclusion and exclusion

These people and their strategies provide paradoxical examples of social exclusion. At the same time, they demonstrate the kind of rationality that development assumes exists amongst the poor – the desire to better themselves and improve their prospects. These people are situated partly or wholly outside of formal sectors and engage with and avoid formal recognition and attention as and when it is prudent for them to do so. They are at once the people development wants to develop, since they aspire to financial gain and social improvement, and at the same time they would resist external development efforts if it meant becoming fully visible. As Hillary Silver and S. M. Miller point out, "Social exclusion is a relative, intrinsically social term. It takes on different meanings, depending upon context or the point of reference for inclusion"

(Silver & Miller 2002: 12). The social and political aspects of exclusion and inclusion are less well accounted for than consumption and income measures, and much of the income circulating among these households is invisible to the authorities in any case.

De Haan (1999) considers that a social exclusion framework can help us to understand the relational features of deprivation; it is about social relations and thus levels of vulnerability and support, access to information and resources and the ability to act and use those resources. It is not what the poor possess that is important, rather it is what it enables them to do. In order to measure social exclusion there is a need to identify the processes and relational features that lead to deprivation, and, we might add, the processes and relational features that can result in social inclusion, because social exclusion and social inclusion are not necessarily the inverse of each other (Levitas 2003). Social relations are at the centre of the analysis of deprivation in the social exclusion framework, and Levitas argues that social inclusion agendas force us to consider the nature of society itself, and how it might be changed for the better, to become more inclusive.

A big challenge, according to De Haan (2000: 37) is that research needs to take seriously a focus on actors and processes, on social relationships that both exclude and include. These are of a cultural and social as much as political and economic nature. To some extent it is the "noise" of the slums that allows the households discussed in this chapter to remain partly and strategically invisible and un-listened to by the authorities.

In conclusion: the role of communication for development and social change

The story of the women wailing and blocking entry into the slum is somehow reminiscent of Clifford Geertz (1973) on the interpretive nature of ethnography, and the importance of "thick description". In Geertz's example, to illustrate the interpretive nature of ethnography, he describes someone closing and opening one eyelid. Was it a blink or a wink, and what did it mean? Interpreting cultures requires thick description, to understand signs and their meanings in context. The women and their wailing needs to be interpreted to be understood.

Ethnography provides an approach that can help us focus on how communication, media and social change are experienced and made meaningful in particular sites (Tacchi 2014; Tacchi, Kitner & Crawford 2012). It does this by engaging with people on their own terms in ways that challenge researchers' preconceived frames, classifications, knowledge, and interpretations. It privileges frames, classifications, knowledge and interpretations as they emerge through fieldwork. As Slater (2013) points out, this is important as a way of reconceiving and challenging the "holy trinity" of new media, development and globalization as organising concepts within which we are all positioned, and in relation to which some people are positioned as needing to "develop". We need to understand how "the boundaries between one apparent category

of social actors and another are bridged, transformed, and shifted… [what is needed are] ethnographies and analyses that explore the complexity and multi-level nature of development processes" (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 19).

I argue that at its best ethnography is thick, open, adaptive, critical and ethical. Ethnography provides thick and rich description and interpretation, through immersion and attention to the tangible and intangible and the structures of meanings. It follows an open and reflexive approach that questions taken-for-granted assumptions, and avoids allowing preconceived categories and classifications to define what is seen and understood. It is adaptive, iterative and non predictive and incorporates different approaches to suit changing situations and emergent questions. It is critical in that it considers the situated nature of knowledge and knowledge production, making frames visible, and takes account of power. Finally it is ethical both in the research engagement and process, but also through its equal privileging of knowledge, classifications, frames, and the centering of structures of meanings and experience, which Slater (2013) names "ethical symmetry".

Being thick, open, adaptive, critical and ethical can help us to understand situations, contexts, experiences and development needs. However, it does not fit so well with the demands for universalizing technical expertise and planning for results approaches which permeate and drive much of development today. Through ethnographies of development "[i]nterventions are not seen as the simple outcome of a value-free and linear planning process, but rather as the changing and negotiated manifestation of diverse and sometimes competing interests" (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 19).

If we accept the complexities of voice, and the need for paying critical attention to the frameworks of development and the relationships and competing interests at stake, where does this leave us in relation to voice and development? After all, while there is a global emphasis on participation in development, along with this there is recognition of a major problem: participation is often criticized as ineffective or simply rhetoric, meaningful participation is not easily recognized or measured. Here is where communication for development and social change has something important to offer development. It can, as Manyozo (2012) proposes, provide the mechanism and space for multiple voices and interests, and for contestation.

While communication for development cannot simplify the depth of complexity or take away the need for interpretation and ethical symmetry that pays attention to ways of knowing that are not necessarily aligned to "travelling rationalities", it does provide a way of facilitating participation in the design of development. It can highlight the contestations and different perspectives involved, and can draw attention to the relationships of developers and people in development contexts. It can make visible the frameworks that are implied and imposed by development as well as allow for participation on terms that suit those encouraged to participate, and in some cases this may consist of the strategic withholding of participation. Communication for development, along with ethnographic approaches to research, can help us understand and work towards a range of different and context specific terms of engagement.

Notes

1. The author and Tripta Chandola began their ethnographic work together in the Govindpuri slums in 2004, as the urban Indian component of a comparative Department for International Development study on emerging technologies in developing communities (Miller et al 2005). Between 2006 and 2010 Chandola undertook a PhD at Queensland University of Technology, supervised by Tacchi. The PhD was an ethnographic study of the soundscapes of Govindpuri. Several additional projects and bits of funding have assisted in the continuation of the ethnographic work in Govindpuri (Chandola, 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Tacchi 2014; Tacchi and Chandola, 2016). This long-term ethnography is outlined in chapter 2 of Digital Ethnography (Pink et al, 2015).

2. Chandola is currently focusing her research on social and political mobilisation, and the recent 6th Delhi legislative assembly elections and landslide victory for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Unlike in earlier elections, there are signs of a different form of political engagement through AAP.