

# Democratising Agri-Food Research Systems<sup>1</sup>

by

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While recognising the need for ‘participation’ and ‘agricultural research to serve the public good’, many organisations and professionals place clear limits on the form and degree of participation that they tolerate in local contexts. Research organisations, professionals (agronomists, foresters, planners, agricultural economists, engineers, plant breeders...) and their funding agencies generally interpret the term “*participation*” in ways which cede little or no democratic control to citizens. This democratic deficit has become more acute with the privatisation of agri-food research in a globalising food system.

A radical shift is required from an increasingly corporate-controlled agricultural research system to an approach which devolves more responsibility and decision making power to farmers, food workers, consumers and citizens. The whole process should lead to the democratisation of agricultural research, diverse forms of co-inquiry based on specialist and non-specialist knowledge, and more transparent oversight. This implies 1) cultural values that emphasise more direct citizen participation in determining research agendas, regulations and policies 2) new professional values, participatory methodologies and behaviour, 3) the adoption of a learning process approach in the production and validation of knowledge, and 4) enabling policies that offer citizens adequate material security and time for democratic deliberation in the context of more localised food systems and economies.

## ***Transforming Agri-Food Research***

The overall aim here is to create safe spaces and processes that allow for more direct citizen participation and pluralism in deciding on the allocation of funds for research, setting research & development (R&D) priorities, in validating new technologies, ascertaining risks in the face of considerable open ended uncertainties and in framing policies for food and farming. A range of institutional and methodological innovations could help, including:

1. Open up decision making bodies and governance structures within R&D organisations and research funding agencies to allow a wider representation of different actors and greater transparency, equity and accountability in budget allocation and decisions on R&D priorities in the agricultural research system. Throughout the world, there is a dire need for much wider and more gender balanced representation of different citizens in these institutions, -small farmers, tribal people, forest dwellers, fisherfolk, healers but also farm workers, small food

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processors, retailers and consumers. These bodies set the agenda for the design of food and farming policies and technologies. They are immensely powerful in that they broadly decide which policies, regulatory frameworks and technologies will ultimately be developed, why, how and for whom. And yet the governance of the overall agri-food research system is presently very much dominated by men who are increasingly distant from the realities of farmers, food workers and consumers, - reflecting more the narrow interests of agri-food corporations.

2. Reorganise conventional social, scientific and technological research to encourage participatory knowledge creation, policy formulations and technological developments that combine the strengths of citizens (farmers, food workers, consumers) and scientists (social and natural) in the search for locally adapted solutions and food systems. An important goal here is to ensure that knowledge, policies and technologies are tailored to the diversity of human needs and situations in which they are to be used,- and this on the basis of an inclusive process of co-inquiry in which the means and ends of R&D are primarily shaped *by, with and for* citizens through conscious deliberation and negotiation.

This participatory process – and the political negotiation over what constitutes valid knowledge in a particular context – deeply challenges science based organisations and professionals to assume different roles and responsibilities. In particular, existing agricultural research systems will often need to shift to new roles that facilitate farmer and other citizens’ deliberations, planning, analysis, monitoring and evaluation in the production of knowledge (both social and technical). This implies changes in organisational cultures and the adoption of new professional skills and values. The adoption of participatory methodologies calls for a greater emphasis on training in communication rather than technical skills. Outside professionals must learn to work closely with colleagues from different disciplines or sectors, as well as with farmers, food workers and consumers in designing food systems for the public good. But training in participatory principles, concepts and methods must be viewed as part of a larger process of reorienting institutional policies, organisational cultures, procedures, financial management practices, reporting systems, supervisory methods, reward systems and norms. Institutional mechanisms and rewards must be designed to encourage the spread of participatory methods within research and donor organisations. Without this, it is unlikely that deliberative and participatory approaches will become core professional activities.

3. Ensure that knowledge and genetic resources on which new technologies are based remain accessible to all as a basic condition for *economic* democracy and the exercise of human rights, including the right to food and participation. National intellectual property right legislation and decisions to issue patents on knowledge and genetic resources important for food and farming require more comprehensive public framing of laws and policies based on deliberative and inclusive models of *direct* democracy.
4. Include the full diversity of interests and values in the formation of overarching policies for food and farming futures as well as in technological risk assessments by running consensus conferences, citizen juries, multi criteria mapping, focus groups and referendums on a regular basis. These deliberative and inclusive democratic procedures will clearly need to be linked into the formal policy

process through appropriate reforms that allow citizens to more directly frame policies and regulations. Recent experiences<sup>2</sup> suggest that these forms of participatory democracy can help re-frame policies on the future of food and farming to reflect broader social interests and goals rather than narrow corporate interests and elite expertise.

### ***Empowering citizens***

It is not enough to focus on a re-invigorated *political* democracy to ensure that agri-food research serves the public good. Widening *economic* democracy is another key condition for the mainstreaming of participation and deliberative democracy in research for food and agriculture. More specifically, there is a need for policies that offer enough *material security* and *time* for citizens (men and women included) to exercise their right to participate in shaping agri-food research for the public good, - what type of research, for whom, how and with what known and uncertain risks and benefits for society and the environment?

Attempts to reform agri-food research to better serve the public good thus need to be envisioned in the context of wider social change. Alternative thinking, practices and innovations for widespread transformation towards gender equity *and* democratic participation need to be explored. The following *mutually reinforcing* structural reforms seem particularly relevant here:

- A redistribution of roles and responsibilities to allow women to work for a decent wage outside the home *and* for men and women to share more evenly in domestic, parenting and caring activities within their households and neighbourhoods. This implies gender equitable property rights over resources as well as redesigning practical arrangements and the use of space and time within the workplace to meet the diverse needs of women, men, dependent children and elderly people (time tables, career paths, working hours, provision of paternity and maternity leave, childcare provisions...).
- A cultural shift that affirms the importance and values of the non-monetarised reproductive sphere as much as the monetarised productive economic sphere – with men *and* women deriving their identities through a plural anchoring in *both* spheres of social life.
- A reduction of time spent in wage-work and more equitable sharing of jobs. This is about finding ways to a) change the sexual division of labour so that men do as much unpaid work as women and engage in caring activities within the domestic/reproductive sphere, b) ensure that wage-work is more evenly distributed so that everyone can invest in other activities, *outside the wage economy*, c) defend the rights associated with wage-work, and d) move towards a post-wage society and introduce new rights de-linked from wage-work. An important goal here is to free up peoples' time for self-chosen and autonomous activities, whilst ensuring freedom from economic necessity.
- The re-localisation of plural economies that combine both subsistence and market oriented activities. The environments where people live will need to offer more

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<sup>2</sup> Pimbert, M.P and Wakeford, T. (2001) Deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment, *PLA Notes* 40, IIED. Co-published by The Commonwealth Foundation, ActionAid, DFID, Sida and IIED. [www.iied.org/docs/pla/pla\\_fs\\_whole.pdf](http://www.iied.org/docs/pla/pla_fs_whole.pdf)

Pimbert, M.P. and Wakeford, T. (2002) *Prajateerpu. A citizens jury/scenario workshop on food and farming futures for Andhra Pradesh, India*. London: IIED. [www.iied.org/pdf/Prajateerpu.pdf](http://www.iied.org/pdf/Prajateerpu.pdf)

individual and collective opportunities to engage in many different activities outside – and unmediated by – the market, wage-work and commodity production.

- A guaranteed and unconditional minimum citizen income for all. A Citizen Income is based on the notion that the productive capacity of society is the result of all the scientific and technical knowledge accumulated by previous generations. This is a common heritage of humankind and all individuals regardless of origin, age or gender have a right to benefit from it, in the form of an unconditional basic income. An equitable distribution of the existing world product would allow each person on earth to benefit from such a basic income. Apart from offering a measure of security, a Citizen Income would allow people – men and women – to find more time to engage in caring activities, civic affairs and democratic decision-making over the means and ends of social life.

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