

Prajateerpu E-Forum on Participatory Processes for Policy Change

Contributions on the subject of Issues of evidence, legitimacy and authenticity.

'How can we ensure that citizen jury processes are fair and unbiased so that their 'verdicts' are accepted as trustworthy by all relevant actors?'

Contributions to this area of the discussion were received from the registrants listed below, and are detailed further down the page.

- [Robert Chambers](#), Research Associate, *Institute of Development Studies*
- [Professor Brian Wynne](#), *Centre for the Study of Environmental Change and Chair of the Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University*
- [Biksham Gujja](#), Co-ordinator, *Freshwater Programme, WWF International*
- [Francisco Sagasti](#), Director, *Agenda: PERU*
- [Dr Keith Bezanson](#), Director, *Institute of Development Studies*, and [Dr Nigel Cross](#), Director, *International Institute for Environment and Development*

A Contribution from **Robert Chambers**, Research Associate, ***Institute of Development Studies***, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK, r.chambers@ids.ac.uk
- 6 September, 2002

Comment:

I agree with John Gaventa's points and will not repeat them. My comments concern commitment, power, presentation, self-critical reflection, costs and potential.

Some of the fallout from the Prajateerpu process has diverted attention from the commitment shared by all those who have become involved. All those I know, in different positions, and in different organisations, are committed to giving voice to those who are poor and excluded. All recognise the contribution that can be made by empowering participatory approaches and methods like citizen's juries, and the need to further develop and use such approaches and methods. The opportunity now is to recognise and build on this common ground.

As in development generally, power is a central issue. It is a pervasive problem that those with power are told what they are believed to want to hear and are vulnerable to rejecting bad news. "All power deceives". This can apply in Government organisations, aid agencies, NGOs and research organisations alike. Wherever we work, none of us is immune. If the voices of poor and marginalised people are to be heard, those with power have to restrain their reactions to unwelcome information or views, even when they believe these to be flawed. Defending oneself or one's organisation may be natural and necessary, but unless done with moderation and self-critical reflection, it can mean missing opportunities to learn and do better. And there is the danger of inhibiting future feedback and learning.

Presentation affects impact. Honest and fearless presentation is a bedrock. At the same time, there are many styles and strategies. Who has not written and rewritten (as I have done with this note) reflecting on who will read what is said...

how they will react to it, cutting out a sentence here, adding another there, in the hope of achieving net good effects? Those who criticise or reject a report sometimes seize on one or two sentences or statements which could have been handled with small editorial changes and little or no loss. How best to present findings demands honesty, sensitivity, courage, and versatility. Far from inhibiting expression, the Prajateerpu experience will reinforce the passionate commitments of colleagues to integrity, independence of expression, pluralism, open debate and amplifying the voices of those who are poor and excluded. Anything less would be a betrayal of our principles and a betrayal of the poor people for whom ultimately we work.

Underlying and informing these values is the rigour of self-critical reflection. Much of the rigour of participatory research is based on this. (This should also apply in positivist research but is rarer there). Self-critical reflection entails striving to be critically aware of oneself, one's interests and predispositions, how one's perceptions and knowledge are formed and sustained, monitoring oneself to guard against the hubris of self-righteousness (and who am I to talk?), and recognising that we are all wrong sometimes. This is much of the basis for validity, trustworthiness and credibility in participatory research. It is then a test of such research to ask how aware, critical and even-handed it is. The authors of the Prajateerpu report go to considerable and unusual pains to explain the process. To the extent that they identify flaws in their work, they add, not detract, from its validity and credibility. And these practices of self-critical reflection are needed too by all actors in development, not least those with more power.

The costs of the Prajateerpu process have been high. Tremendous efforts in India went into preparing and conducting the jury, not least those of the convenors, jurors, witnesses, facilitators and oversight panel, and then into writing up and disseminating the results. On top of that, the costs of the subsequent controversies have been exceptionally high. These are easily overlooked as costs. My own reluctance to engage could be attributed variously to cowardice, prudence, lack of commitment, laziness, wanting a quiet life, having friends on different sides of the debate, or (and of course my ego prefers this self-righteous and oh-so-dubious excuse) wishing to use in other ways whatever time and energy remain to me. It has been sad to see so many good people sucked in and stressed. The opportunity cost of their time and energy has been huge. Given their personal commitments, this has brought indirect, but no less real because unseen, costs to poor people. This must apply in NGOs in India, in DfID, in IIED and in IDS, and for the researchers and others. There has been pain, distress and anger, sleepless nights and even sickness. There is a lot for all, not least the main actors, to reflect on, and a lot for the development community at large to learn about how to minimise costs like these without sacrificing, and in indeed while enhancing, benefits to poor people.

That said, the potential benefits remain enormous. There are the substantive findings. Many others might want to join me in an appeal to policy-makers and others to listen, reflect and act on what the jurors concluded. There is so much there that otherwise would have been so little heard. Further, there is the pioneering of the methodology and the prominent recognition it has received. May many others be inspired to conduct and take part in consultations of this sort. May these increasingly level the playing fields of power, and inform and improve policy and practice. And may they enable many more of those who are poor and excluded to gain for themselves the better lives which are their right.

A contribution from **Professor Brian Wynne, Centre for the Study of Environmental Change and Chair of the Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University**, Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK, b.wynne@lancaster.ac.uk – August 18, 2002

Comment:

Interpretive Responsibilities

Public consultation, participation or deliberative processes always pose the question of how to interpret what 'public voice' means for whatever context and actors are salient in a given case (and even these may be open to different definitions). It is rarely likely to be so clear, direct, explicit and focused as to require little or no such work and responsibility. In this sense the Prajateerpu work is part of a much larger diverse body that is attempting to understand and represent those people referred to, and often quoted at length. This is simultaneously, and legitimately, both intellectual and political – and it should be part of a continuing process of publication, alternative attempted representations and interpretations, criticism and development of positions and understandings, including self-understandings... Whatever the rights and wrongs of their account of the public voices, which can be openly criticized and developed, Pimbert and Wakeford seem to have done just this, whilst their critics appear to be operating with the assumption that social science research can be done free of any such interpretive work. This is not true, including for quantitative social survey methods which often conceal their interpretive commitments in the standard meanings necessarily assumed in the closed questions (e.g. about 'risk', or 'science', or 'uncertainty') which they formulate and use. I may have misunderstood some of the criticism, but some of it appears to me to reflect this mistaken (and sadly not by any means unusual) positivist epistemic frame.

[T]he ostensibly clear negative verdict given by the jurors to GM crops should surely be read as a resounding NO under existing conditions, which is not necessarily a NO forever, under any circumstances. As a general matter, I would like to have seen much more focus in the Citizens' Jury deliberations and in the post-Jury analysis by the authors, on the possible conditions under which new food technologies such as these, would be regarded as consistent with the other livelihood-needs of the jurors and their marginal farmer ilk. There is ample evidence of this sort scattered throughout the findings...but it is not organized in such a way as to allow this kind of question the policy prominence it deserves. In this sense it falls inadvertently into the wider tendency ...of the automatic polarization of the global GM crops-foods issue into the rigid options of either swallow it whole, as given, or reject it totally... Why can we not take seriously alternative models of modernisation, including ones which narrow-minded dogmatic proponents of particular visions might not even recognize as such because they involve different relations of power, political culture and control-accountability of science and technology? Unfortunately, and maybe inevitably given the power-relations involved, the Prajateerpu process and report ended up vulnerable to being seen as just a negative condemnation of one such vision, and not as also a positive articulation of alternatives grounded in more effective democratic inputs...

...Here, I would have liked to see a more systematic attempt to elicit the conditions [for these alternatives]... and then to have seen them analysed for their implications. This would offer one possible escape from the rather immature dominant assumptions that the only answers are 'Yes' or 'No', leaving a gaping hole which should be central in public discourse and research and policy, about what conditions would be needed (including changed technologies and changed ownership-forms) to make the technologies more socially acceptable. At least this

might offer a new collective learning trajectory to escape from the simplistic binary polarisations, which have defined many such issues thus far.

A Contribution from **Biksham Gujja**, Co-ordinator, *Freshwater Programme, WWF International*, Gland, Switzerland, BGujja@wwfint.org - 15 August 2002

Comment:

Jury processes can be fair and unbiased as much as possible, but all the relevant actors may not accept their verdicts. If those actors happen to have the power to override the views of the vast majority of people then they can ignore the outcome, irrespective of quality of evidence, fairness of the jury etc. Legitimacy and authenticity are related to power. They also depend on resources. Most often, poor people do not have the resources to collect, present and authenticate the evidence and facts.

A Contribution from **Francisco Sagasti**, Director, *Agenda: PERU*, Apartado 18-1194 Lima, Peru, fsagasti@amauta.rcp.net.pe

Comment:

One problem I noted with the Prajateerpu process was the way the Jury was used to deal with anticipated events. As the report points out, citizen's juries, people's courts and similar schemes have been used to address a variety of issues in a participatory manner, both in developed and developing countries. However, by and large, most of those issues refer to specific and clearly delimited questions in which judgements of fact and value have to be made by informed representatives of the general public – who must decide, for example, whether an accused person is guilty or not, whether public policies (health, environment, zoning) serve the interests of citizens, or whether local governments programs have been adequately designed and put in practice. In these cases, the issues dealt with are usually empirically grounded, adequate data is available and evidence can be presented to the jurors. This is not the situation when dealing with scenarios and hypothetical events that may (or may not) take place with a twenty-year time horizon. Hard data, facts and evidence, which constitute the foundation on which jurors weave their judgements of fact and value, do not exist when dealing with hypothetical futures and scenarios.

The second problem I have with this study is the way in which the scenarios were prepared and presented to the jury members. I have worked with scenarios for a long time, and one of the first lessons I learned is that, for a scenario exercise to be valid and useful, the alternative scenarios should be equally appealing to participants, for example, in terms of the impact they would have on their lives. This is the way in which values and aspirations can be brought out into the light and made explicit, but without introducing biases that could invalidate the exercise. Otherwise, when the descriptions of future situations contained in alternative scenarios are not equally desirable, participant's choices tend to focus on the "most desirable" scenario constructed by the organizers of the exercise and thus confirm their views. As a consequence, the process by which the scenarios are constructed requires a great deal of rigor and self-restraint. Preparing three equally attractive but qualitatively different, scenarios is a rather difficult task, and it does not appear that the researchers in this project did that. Biases show clearly in the descriptions contained in the appendix, and even without a citizen's jury process, it is clear that the third scenario would appeal to the jurors —especially considering the jury selection procedures.

These two considerations lead me to the conclusion that, it would have been almost impossible for results to be different; using a metaphor, one could say that the dice were loaded right from the beginning of the project. In addition, when reading the document I also noticed several instances in which the authors use language that would be more at home in a political statement, rather than in a research report. This is why I consider this to be an advocacy, not a research exercise.

A Contribution from **Dr Keith Bezanson, Director, *Institute of Development Studies***, Falmer, Sussex, UK, K.Bezanson@ids.ac.uk and **Dr Nigel Cross, Director, *International Institute for Environment and Development***, London, UK, Nigel.Cross@iied.org - 8 August 2002

Comment:

We regard citizen jury approaches as an innovative and promising avenue of participatory research. It is precisely because this involves novel and experimental methodologies, however, that our position is that considerable prudence and caution are required in claims made for the validity and reliability of results.

This position is neither new nor unique. Our Institutes apply precisely the same reasoning to new and innovative microbiological research in genetic modification where we continue to argue forcefully that results need to be presented with much greater tentativeness and prudence than is generally the case. More specifically, we have argued that responsible research in genetically modified products requires considerable independent replication before claims of scientific generalisability should be made and that the 'precautionary principle' should be followed not only as a matter of social and political policy but also as a matter of responsible scientific practice. Our conclusion is that the presentation of the Prajateerpu report does not reflect a sufficiently 'precautionary' approach, that the results should have been presented as promising but requiring replication, further verification and additional independent validation.

The key to the validity of a scenario exercise is that the scenarios should, at a minimum, always aim at a fully balanced presentation of pluses and minuses. This is the central, defining principle of social enquiry predicated on the construction of scenarios. If scenarios are presented in a way that makes one of them inherently far more appealing than others, they produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. The description of the scenarios in the Prajateerpu report demonstrates not only that they fall far short of meeting a criterion of being equally appealing, they do not comprise a balanced presentation of pluses and minuses. Indeed, they appear to have created a strong probability that only the third scenario would be viewed by the jury as holding any merit at all in terms of bringing benefits into their lives and the lives of poor and marginal farmers in Andhra Pradesh. These scenarios are critically central to the credibility of the report. Yet any benefits indicated for Scenario 1 are quickly offset by an extensive range of negative factors. The same applies to Scenario 2. But not a single negative or even risk of a negative has been included in the third scenario.

In sum, any actual or potential benefits from the first two scenarios are quickly offset by a substantial number of serious negatives, including greater insecurity, loss of jobs (livelihoods) and political disempowerment. By contrast, Scenario 3 is a portrait of rural harmony, social harmony, livelihoods, empowerment, environmental sustainability, personal economic and financial gain, and so on.

Now, it is entirely possible that the negatives listed for the first two scenarios could represent an entirely realistic assessment of what could/would actually result from those scenarios. Whether we would agree or otherwise with what is presented in those scenarios is not something that we intend to argue here. Our concern has been and is over the scientific validity of the scenarios methodology that has been used. Whatever one's personal value preferences, a balanced presentation of scenarios would require the stipulation of several obvious high risks of negative consequences within the third scenario. There is, for example, no shortage of evidence of diminishing returns to agricultural intensification by smallholder farmers. The three scenarios comprised the main reference points for the deliberative tasks assigned to the jury, but the scenarios are seriously imbalanced. Far from meeting the criterion of "equally appealing," they create the strong impression of bias and of having established a self-fulfilling prophecy.
