

Prajateerpu E-Forum on Participatory Processes for Policy Change

Contributions on the subject of Issues of representation in citizen juries and similar participatory approaches.

' How can we ensure that citizen juries are representative of the wider populations from which they are drawn? How can we extrapolate lessons from specific citizen jury deliberations on key issues to wider policy debates? How can we use citizen jury-type procedures to ensure that the voices of poor people are represented in policy decisions that impinge on their lives?

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

- [Andy Stirling](#), *SPRU - Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Sussex*
- [Professor John Gaventa](#), *Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex*
- [Vinita Suryanarayanan](#), *MAYA*
- [Dominic Glover](#), *Research Officer, Institute of Development Studies*
- [L. David Brown](#), *Director of International Programs, Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations*
- [Priya Deshingkar](#), *AP Research Director Livelihood Options Project (ODI), and [Craig Johnson](#), Overseas Development Institute*
- [Biksham Gujja](#), *Co-ordinator, Freshwater Programme, WWF International*
- [Professor Jules Pretty](#), *Department of Biological and Chemical Sciences, John Tabor Laboratories, University of Essex*
- [Francisco Sagasti](#), *Director, Agenda: PERU*
- [Dr Keith Bezanson](#), *Director, Institute of Development Studies, and [Dr Nigel Cross](#), Director, International Institute for Environment and Development*
- [Professor Paul Richards](#), *Wageningen Agricultural University*

A Contribution from **Andy Stirling**, *SPRU - Science and Technology Policy Research*, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RF, UK, a.c.stirling@sussex.ac.uk, - 30 August 2002

Comment:

Notions of 'representativeness' in recruitment, 'transparency' of process, 'authenticity' in findings and 'independence' in engagement are all intrinsically ambiguous. They can therefore be quite problematic in the context of highly charged discussions over the validity or quality of any given exercise. In this forum, for instance, John Gaventa addresses particular difficulties with 'representativeness' and Brian Wynne raises several issues bearing on 'independence'. I believe that the implications span several of the discussion headings and are best addressed together. Neither set of points relate exclusively to the particular Indian – let alone the Prajateerpu - context. It is generally the case, for instance, that notions of 'representativeness' and 'independence' depend on the subjective selection, definition and partitioning of populations, issues, interests and institutions. Any one concept of 'representativeness' or 'independence' will embody only a subset of possible relevant factors. be open to

equally valid (but discordant) interpretations and remain subject to important contingencies in the unfolding of a particular process or its context.

Against this background, it is important to reflect on persistent attempts to reify concepts like 'representativeness' and 'independence' in this field. Here, I believe that there is an important distinction to be made between alternative roles for participatory deliberation. It can be undertaken either to contribute to the 'opening up', or to the 'closing down', of policy discourses. In this episode, as elsewhere, much discussion seems to imply that key interests (on all sides) lie in 'closing down' socio-political conflict. If so, the outcomes of any participatory deliberation remain as vulnerable as other approaches to policy appraisal (like risk assessment or cost-benefit analysis) to the potentially volatile effects of internal or external contingencies, or to inadvertent or deliberate framing to justify particular policy prescriptions. Where the purpose (explicit or implicit) is to assist in 'closing down' a policy discourse, it becomes correspondingly important to deny or marginalise the unavoidable role of subjectivity, agency and contingency. Resulting claims and counterclaims over reified notions of 'representativeness' or 'independence' provide one important way in which this dynamic plays out.

Where, on the other hand, appraisal in general - and participatory deliberation in particular - is oriented towards the 'opening up' of policy discourses, the need to invoke the authority of reified principles like representativeness or independence diminishes. If the purpose is to illuminate the implications of different framing assumptions, reveal the diversity of perspectives or give voice to otherwise marginalised constituencies, then there is less pressure to resort to this kind of language. The manner of engagement with policy debates is also very different in 'opening up' mode. The purpose becomes one of informing and stimulating more active and plural discourse rather than prescribing and justifying particular options for closure.

Active political contention becomes visible not as a pathology to be denied or subverted in appraisal, but as an important element in assuring the substantive quality and robustness of policymaking and the effectiveness of social learning.

Indeed, addressing another discussion heading in the present forum, it is arguably only by undertaking participatory deliberation in 'opening up' mode, that principles of transparency and accountability can best be addressed. Transparency is better fulfilled by documenting the implications of different views and leaving these open-ended than by orienting activities exclusively towards consensus or common ground. Likewise, accountability is better achieved in political decision making as a whole, if the full variety of issues, options and perspectives are effectively revealed in policy appraisal (like participatory deliberation), rather than artificially closed down. This distinction between 'opening up' and 'closing down' therefore applies as much in the criticism, interpretation and evaluation of participatory deliberation as in the conduct of any given exercise. The difference is as much analytic as it is normative. It certainly transcends any superficial or rhetorical distinction between 'disinterested research' and 'partisan lobbying'.

It appears to me that the Prajateerpu exercise can be seen very much in this latter and entirely legitimate tradition of action oriented research. As such, issues of representativeness and independence remain to be critically scrutinised alongside other factors, but they are more open, plural and context-specific than has sometimes been conceded in this episode. Although I do not have the relevant experience to make definitive judgements over these questions in the

present case, it seems clear to me that the Prajateerpu exercise presents no particular issues that are not raised equally in many acknowledged high quality exercises in participatory deliberation. In any event, such considerations certainly do not provide a sufficient basis for qualifying those findings, which are elicited, nor for blanket rejection of the validity of the exercise taken as a whole. It is for this reason that the key theme for me in this episode transcends the four specific aspects headlined in the present forum. The crucial issue seems rather to concern the need to be reflexive over the role of power in academic discussions over issues of 'representation', 'evidence', 'engagement' and 'accountability'. Of course, such reflexivity should be an explicit feature of any particular exercise - and Prajateerpu (along with many others, including some that I have been associated with) may be subject to criticism on this count. But this same consideration also highlights a particularly challenging responsibility of leadership in academic institutions. Reified concepts like 'representativeness' or 'independence' cannot credible in themselves be invoked uncritically to support blanket repudiation of individual bodies of work, let alone the associated researchers. The aims of rigorous, disinterested enquiry are best served by pluralistic, critical engagement and not the direct exercise of institutional authority. Those responsible at IIED and IDS deserve full credit for striving towards the former in the present Forum.

Comments for **Professor John Gaventa**, *Institute of Development Studies*, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK, J.P.Gaventa@ids.ac.uk - August 27, 2002

Comment:

In a project such as this one, and in a country as complex as India, obtaining a truly 'representative' citizens' jury would have been impossible, as it would have been to obtain a truly 'representative' sample using any other method. Given this reality, the action researcher needs to do two things: first, not to hide behind the mythology of neutrality; secondly, to be clear about how issues of representation are being dealt with. The Prajateerpu report seems to have done both. Several pages are devoted to explaining the criteria of jury selection, and making very clear that jurists were selected, in part, on the basis of membership in an existing group, which might strengthen the capacity of the jurists to engage in using the results of the research process if they chose to do so.

Such selective sampling, as long as it is clear and transparent, is entirely legitimate, and, arguably far more valid than the random representation process, which ignores the social agency of the person from whom knowledge is being elicited, and which fails to involve the 'respondents' as active 'proponents' in using research findings. If the concern of action research is not only knowledge generation, but also the generation of action and public awareness, then explicitly biasing the research towards those poor farmers who are more socially positioned to act is consistent with the methodology. Otherwise, such research is likely to be yet another extractive exercise which, in the name of 'neutrality' or 'objectivity', fails to benefit the poor.

To judge a report such as Prajateerpu using criteria of 'rigour' and 'validity' that have emerged from within a positivist paradigm, as many of those who have questioned it seem to have done, is to miss the point. The origins of participatory action research itself are predicated on going beyond a notion of scientism which, through reducing the 'subjects' of knowledge' to the passive 'objects' of someone else's research often served to reify and re-enforce existing power relations within the status quo.

This is not to say that issues of rigour and validity are not important in action research exercises. Of course they are. But why not focus on criteria that are evolving in the action research field rather than using criteria for assessment of quality research drawn from an entirely different paradigm? One could look for instance at the essay by Bradbury and Reason 'Broadening the Bandwidth of Validity: Issues and Choice-Points for Improving the Quality of Action Research' in the authoritative Handbook of Action Research, recently published by Sage. This essay usefully summarises thinking which has helped to 'shift the dialogue about validity from a concern with idealist questions in search of 'Truth' to concern for engagement, dialogue, pragmatic outcomes and an emergent, reflexive sense of what is important' (447). Assessing Prajateerpu on the basis of these latter criteria, would, I suspect, lead to very different conclusions than those reached by its critics who use more traditional measures.

Ultimately, of course, what is considered 'rigorous' or 'valid' research is linked to the questions of who has the power and influence to determine what is acceptable and what is not. Concerns with methodology have historically been used by those with power to discredit those who challenge dominant discourse, as the body of knowledge on power and knowledge has shown. In this day and time, when a great deal of rhetorical service is paid to 'participation' by powerful development institutions, it is not unusual for those same institutions to question the message or the messengers when the results of participatory processes do not support the status quo.

If the jurists in this case had reached a differing conclusion, more favourable to the dominant development plans and processes of the state and international donors, would the concerns we have heard about rigour and evidence still have been raised? Or, if those representing the marginal farmers had done so, would these concerns have drawn such international attention? One wonders.

If there is a significant flaw in this report, it is that the researchers arguably used the final chapter to discuss points not clearly supported in the 'evidence' of the jury process. However, the authors do very clearly say that this final chapter offers 'critical reflections on the wider significance of Prajateerpu'. They do not assert that these reflections are drawn from the jury process alone, and they clearly state on the back cover of the report that the views and opinions of the report do not reflect those of their sponsoring agency, their partners or their donors.

However, where the authors assert in the final chapter that 'there is little evidence' that the donor agencies involved have used 'appropriate methodologies to bring the voices of the poor into the planning and design of their aid programmes in Andra Pradesh', it would have been valuable for them to give us more information to support their claim. (To do so, based on what I have seen separately from the authors, would likely have strengthened their case.)

If participatory processes are to be held accountable, claims to inclusion of the 'voices of the poor' need to be publicly monitored, challenged and questioned, based on informed views. And, if the Andra Pradesh example is such an important case of large-scale public participation, as the donors argue, then please let it be held up for more – not less – public research, scrutiny and debate. The opportunity for valuable learning on how to scale up and improve the quality of participatory processes in poverty programmes and policies would be great. Unfortunately, that opportunity may have been missed by the diversion of the public debate to the important – but ultimately less significant – question of the validity of the report itself, rather than of the authenticity of voice and

participation in the multimillion pound development strategies which the report questions.

A Contribution from **Vinita Suryanarayanan, MAYA**, 111, 6th Main, 5th block, Jayanagar, Bangalore, Karnataka, India, vinitas@mayaindia.org - 27 August 2002

Comment:

1. How can we ensure that citizen juries are representative of the wider populations from which they are drawn? First, I think we need to clarify who the 'we' refers to. If it refers to practitioners/NGOs than there is a need to pay attention to the processes and enable the participants to begin identifying this as an issue; however if it refers to the participants (which it should ideally) than there would be a need for them to gain the necessary experience before identifying this as an issue.

While it is true that a process ensuring the full representation of all individuals/members is not feasible or even necessary at all times, it is important to aim towards a process that is open and inclusive for all individuals who may wish to participate. Further, rather than pre-determining who represents the group, the mechanism has to be such that every individual feels valued, that it ensures functional democracy, that even if there is a representative, s/he is chosen to do a function as defined by the people not the other way around. Thus, the problem has to be defined by the larger community as an expression of needs by the 'collective self'. This might ensure that citizen jury processes become more representative of the wider population and serve as one mechanism for accountability of the individual to the larger group.

2. How can we extrapolate lessons from specific citizen jury deliberations on key issues to wider policy debates? If one were to look at the nature of specific jury deliberations in terms of participation, representation, quality of the discussion (not necessarily consensus) and other such process-related aspects rather than the issue being deliberated, it would certainly be useful to apply to wider policy debates.

3. How can we use citizen jury-type procedures to ensure that the voices of poor people are represented in policy decisions that impinge on their lives?) In order that such participatory processes become an integral part of policy decisions, there is a need to work towards evolving mechanisms that necessitate such participatory processes as pre-requisites for policy formulation and subsequent reviewing.

A Contribution from **Dominic Glover**, Research Officer, **Institute of Development Studies**, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, D.Glover@ids.ac.uk - 23 August 2002

Comment:

In the Prajateerpu report, the authors argue that the citizens' jury represents an alternative and distinctive 'tradition of representation' that contrasts with commonly accepted strands of representation like opinion polls. I agree that the value of the citizens' jury derives from its nature as a deliberative forum and that conventional 'scientific' assessments of validity and reliability, such as statistical representativeness, may be inappropriate ways of evaluating the legitimacy of the jury process or its outcome.

However, it is worth qualifying the Prajateerpu authors' rather extravagant praise of the (judicial) jury. It is important not to exaggerate the emancipatory significance of the jury system's roots in the Magna Carta of 1215. Essentially,

the Magna Carta represented a victory for the English barons in their political struggle with the king. The mechanism of the jury provided an institutional power base to protect 'free men' from the arbitrary exercise of the king's powers over their property and personal security. The Magna Carta was certainly not intended to emancipate the vast mass of English subjects. But, of course, this pedantic critique of the jury system's roots doesn't help us to discuss the value of the jury in contemporary judicial systems.

Research into the ways in which modern legal juries hear, understand, evaluate and make decisions on the evidence presented to them in court, leads to highly equivocal conclusions about the alertness, engagement, consideration and responsibility with which jurors carry out their tasks, both individually and, much less, collectively. Besides these considerations, legal juries are charged only with 'finding facts' and reaching a simple Yes/No conclusion on the evidence before them. Therefore it is important not to place too much weight on the usefulness of the judicial jury as an analogue, much less an exemplary model, for 'citizens' juries' that are to deliberate on complex and controversial socio-economic and ethical questions and choices.

The value of the 'citizens' jury' should be seen in its nature as an inclusive, participatory, deliberative forum and not necessarily as a 'fact-finding' or decision-making body. The citizens' jury lacks the capacity, and is an inappropriate body, to make decisions on behalf of others (as a legal jury is supposed to). I suggest that two recommendations follow from these brief points. Firstly, the analogy with juries needs to be downplayed, both rhetorically and in practice, because it is unhelpful and misleading. Therefore it would have been helpful if the Prajateerpu report had placed less emphasis on the collective 'verdict' of the jury and more on the other outcomes of the process, especially so as to draw out the complexities and subtleties of the deliberations as well as the knowledge, opinions and preferences of the jury-members.

Secondly we should recognise that, ideally, participatory and inclusive deliberative processes need to be integrated with, and complementary to, other mechanisms of representation, transparency and accountability. These may include representative democratic bodies, accountable bureaucracies, an accessible judicial system, free mass media and so on. This ideal should not detract from recognition that, even in contexts where such complements are missing, the citizens' jury plays a critically important role in providing a forum for the expression of excluded voices in the policy process.

A Contribution from **L. David Brown**, Director of International Programs, **Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations**, Harvard University, 79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA, dave_brown@harvard.edu - 20 August 2002

Comment:

It is quite striking how much energy and discussion the Prajateerpu report has generated. I agree that the description of results of participatory processes need to be couched with care, given that fully representative samples and unbiased processes are difficult or impossible to achieve within reasonable cost constraints. Earlier comments suggest that the Prajateerpu juries may have been less than representative and the scenarios may have been flawed.

But if our goal is to listen to the voices of the poor and disenfranchised, it may be that we want to hear from relatively outspoken ('biased?') 'opinion leaders' who have already begun to think about the issues. A representative sample of the electorate may not be much help in predicting election outcomes if less than half the electorate bothers to vote. Seeking fully representative juries may be an inappropriate goal.

It may also be that the Prajateerpu scenarios were unbalanced in their description of negatives and positives associated with the alternatives. But I am not very surprised that small farmers were not attracted to scenarios that threatened their tenure on the land. 'Balanced' scenarios that obscure fundamental consequences can produce distorted verdicts as well.

More generally, I am concerned about what seems to be an implicit assumption that if the juries had been fully representative and the process perfectly designed, the results would be 'scientifically true' and less subject to challenge. It seems to me that the juries' inputs should be treated as one more flawed input to the discussion, from sources with a relatively large stake and relatively small voice in the decision. Those voices can be treated with some scepticism, if there are reasons to believe that their views have been overstated.

I understand DFID's annoyance with they see as distorted descriptions and conclusions. But using the Prajateerpu report to press for full implementation of discipline-based standards of rigorous research – at a time when we are increasingly recognising the special value of modes of research that emphasize multi-disciplinary, problem-centred, engagements between researchers and practitioners that are tailored to particular contexts – would be serious step backward. Truth in labelling results by recognising ambiguities or shortcomings in the research makes a lot of sense. But commitment to fully representative sampling, wholly balanced scenarios, and other standards of research rigour that may not fit the situation can greatly increase the costs of citizen juries – and so undermine the goal of hearing otherwise inaudible voices in policy-making.

A Contribution from **Priya Deshingkar**, AP Research Director **Livelihood Options Project (ODI)**, and **Craig Johnson**, **Overseas Development Institute**, Plot 49 Kamalapuri Colony Phase III, Hyderabad 500073, livelihoods@eth.net - 16 August 2002

Comment:

Having not been participants at Prajateerpu we can only comment on the fallout of the event. The point has already been made in this forum that the selection of the jurors leaves some doubts about their representativeness as they were chosen by an NGO with a strong position on the subject. The point that we wish to make is that the reporting of the jury verdict by the press and other NGOs magnified this underlying bias, and fuelled myths regarding the state of the rural economy and the role of intensive agriculture and markets. In fact the debate has focused on a few pet issues of national and international NGOs but has left out issues related to debt, corruption and the need for access to markets that were raised by the jury. In addition to the potential for organising NGOs to "facipulate" the process, the information filtering and distorting role of organisations that are several steps removed from the actual event needs to be recognised.

We will address three of the dangerous myths that have been propogated and which rigorous empirical work in AP challenges.

1. Myth 1. People want to remain in subsistence agriculture

The very high proportion of people in agriculture in India and many developing countries may not be an indication that their preferred livelihood choice is to remain peasant farmers, it may actually indicate that they have no other choice. Our year-long fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh has shown that the aspirations of many poor people are not to stay tied to the land but to look for alternative

means of livelihood. But it is not easy because they lack the skills and capital to engage in more lucrative activities and therefore switch from one low-paid activity to another. Combined with this is the increased need for cash in rural households – for health care, irrigation, marriages and education. Creating more paid opportunities outside agriculture could be a more effective way of addressing poverty rather than promoting a subsistence model.

2. Myth 2. The poor do not need to engage with markets

The poor are already intertwined with markets – for pesticides, seeds, fertiliser, water, produce, labour and supplies. But the terms are often highly exploitative. Buying and selling of agricultural inputs and outputs is through agents and middlemen who do not work under competitive market rules. The poor buy expensively and sell cheaply. Distress commerce is widespread. Very few people get a legal minimum wage for their labour, especially women and the so-called untouchable castes. Most poor people are locked into debt and the stranglehold of moneylenders. Fair terms of exchange would help small producers and more access to markets could be one way to achieve that.

3. Myth 3. New is bad and traditional is good.

There are several traditional institutions and processes that are keeping poor people poor. Among these are agrarian relations, caste and sexual discrimination, political powerlessness, physical remoteness and last but not least corruption. Is it not possible that modern contractual arrangements could suit the poor better than traditional arrangements with patrons and landlords?

The poor need new options and we need more public debate on how to create them. We cannot jump to conclusions about complex and uncertain scenarios on the basis of one citizen's jury. Only a sustained process of engagement – an ongoing and broad-ranging dialogue – with poor people will give us a true understanding of their aspirations, priorities and opinions.

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

Comment:

Issue of representation in any process will be questioned when the outcome is not liked by one side. If that side happens to wield power – the jury, the representation and process will be questioned. There will not be any process that will get a perfect representation. This is not unique to participatory approaches. What is important is not aiming for perfect representation, but the transparency, inclusiveness and openness of the process. As long as the process is open for anyone to participate, it should be okay.

But issues of representation by anyone should be raised before, not after the deliberation.

a. How can we ensure that citizen juries are representative of the wider populations from which they are drawn? In my view, it depends on who this "WE" is? As long as the 'jury' is comprised of representatives of the people, who do not have direct interest in outcome – except sympathy and compassion with poor, those individuals are fine. In any case, the jury selection process should also be as open as possible.

b. How can we extrapolate lessons from specific citizen jury deliberations on key issues to wider policy debates? - It is not easy, but generally if such extrapolations are addressing totally different issues, regions and contexts, they will have to be taken with caution. If they are directly related to the same issue

(e.g. food, water, etc.), then, yes, they should be taken into consideration.

Some comments from **Professor Jules Pretty, Department of Biological and Chemical Sciences, John Tabor Laboratories, University of Essex**, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 5SQ, UK, jpretty@essex.ac.uk - 11 August 2002

Comment:

Recently, my colleagues H Ward, A Norval, T Landman and I wrote an article for Political Studies (in press) entitled 'Open citizens' juries and the politics of sustainability'. In that article we made the following observations, which seem to have a direct bearing on this debate.

General points from the literature:

1. Citizens may take a longer-term, more socially-oriented point of view when they are encouraged to deliberate on environmental issues.
2. As a result, they may be less prone to free ride, and driven by narrow self-interest.
3. They are more likely to see decisions they have participated in making as legitimate, so their lifestyles are more likely to be altered and associated policies more likely to be implemented.
4. Local knowledge of environmental conditions, institutions and social capital can be drawn upon to encourage better deals that stick over time.

There are good practical and theoretical reasons for supporting citizens' juries as an innovation for deepening democratic participation. It is generally accepted that citizens' juries can address many of the problems associated with obtaining quality participation – even though they are expensive.

But there remain three areas of particular concern:

1. the need to make space for deliberation and to address the problem of inducing people to participate;
2. the question of social balance and representativeness,
3. the extent to which changes from individual interests to larger social concerns are facilitated by democratic practices.

Even among those who do participate in participatory forums, some will not become well-informed. As a result, the quality of deliberation will suffer. Citizens' juries provide opportunities for learning and gathering information. Unlike opinion polls where individuals express their own opinions, members of a citizens' jury normally express a collective viewpoint. This may orientate jurors towards wider social concerns.

Despite many positive features, citizens' juries, especially in the form in which they are commonly run in the UK and US, still face many problems, in particular the:

1. over-emphasis on a restrictive conception of rationality and deliberation and its effects on the problem of 'voice' – in most CJs, a premium is placed on expert testimony, with expertise being construed in a rationalistic way – with such emphases leading to a restriction on acceptable forms of argumentation as well as on topics for deliberation.
2. drive to consensus, which may lead to the papering over of deep antagonisms by superficial compromises – even those who acknowledge that deliberation may not lead to convergence of viewpoint still regard consensus as the ideal – there simply may not be an ideal solution that everyone can agree upon. A truly democratic jury will have to make room for dissensus and disagreement.

3. problem of agenda control by those who commission and run the jury – while sponsors and organisers set the agenda, juries can sometimes modify the charge, but rarely criticise structures, institutions, and resource-inequalities framing the issues.

An open citizens' jury model would encourage deeper democratic participation by addressing the limitations identified above. First, juries should be conceived of as part of a potentially open and open-ended political process where they contribute to a broader debate. Second, the jury should be accessible to all those who wish to express a viewpoint. Third, juries should be open to various forms of argumentation and rhetoric.

A Contribution from **Francisco Sagasti**, Director, *Agenda: PERU*, Apartado 18-1194

Lima, Peru, fsagasti@amauta.rcp.net.pe

Comment:

I found this debate over the lessons emerging from the Prajateerpu process and report most interesting, primarily because it covers three long-standing concerns of mine. First, I have been working for quite some time with participatory processes, insisting that development work should look beyond the experts and actively engage citizens (the most recent example of this is what we did in *Agenda: PERU* for nearly a decade). Second, since the mid-1970s I have argued for the recovery and selective upgrading of traditional technologies and for acknowledging the importance of traditional knowledge in the development process. Third, much of my work during the last three decades has focused on the role that external agents play in the process of development, and how to make them more responsive to the needs and wishes of the poor in developing regions.

While I enjoyed reading the Prajateerpu report, at the same time I was disappointed and disturbed by its content and by the way the results of the research were presented. I fully share the concerns and commitment of the researchers, which emerges clearly throughout the report, but I find deep flaws in the methodology, the arguments and the processes that were followed in the study.

One major flaw I observed in the Prajateerpu process is the way in which jurors were selected and the way in which the meetings were conducted. The authors of the study identified and selected jurors on the basis of information provided by community groups associated with NGOs and advocacy organizations. From my experience with similar groups in other parts of the world, I would be most surprised if these community groups, NGOs and organizations were not opposed to the modernization of traditional agricultural practices, and biased against “neo-liberal” market-oriented policies in general. This is perfectly legitimate and I have great respect for their views – sometimes find myself in agreement with them, but in order to conform to good practices in social science and action research we must acknowledge such biases, make them explicit and do our best to prevent them from tainting the results of our research. The three criteria used to select jurors (small or marginal farmers living near or below the poverty line, open-minded, with no close connection to NGOs or political parties, likely to be articulate in discussions) appear sensible, but sometimes the third one contradicts the first two: articulate farmers usually have had interactions with organisations such as NGOs and political parties! Moreover, one of the things I

have learned from small group behaviour is that there is an inherent bias towards "groupthink" and a desire to avoid conflict. This usually leads to "pseudo-consensus" as group members avoid contradicting each other, to the groups agreeing on what they imagine the organizers of the event want to hear, and to the most vocal and assertive members carrying the day. The ice-breaking and rapport-building sessions the group participated in during the first half-day all but guaranteed a situation in which the "groupthink" biases would be quite strong.

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 find aspects of the citizens' jury methodology used in the Prajateerpu study problematic and, even if it may be asserted that this did not lead to bias in the report a very strong appearance remains. This conclusion relates especially to the manner in which the jury was selected and especially to the nature of the three scenarios.

The list of potential jurors for the Prajateerpu event was provided by local NGOs. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. Indeed, we have urged and supported participatory research precisely on the basis of this type of selection (the result of which is classified in social science statistics as selective but not representative) and we have argued that this is important as a counter-weight to the traditional imbalance that derives from groups of "experts" who are selected by "officials" and who have acted as judges and juries in making choices for poor people. But, it would be surprising if the NGOs and community groups were not as a matter of principle critical of the modernisation of traditional agriculture and to non-local markets. In other words, the sampling technique may have created a bias towards a particular result in the research. Let us emphasise that we have no problem with this and would argue that it is entirely legitimate -- even necessary -- to seek out the voices of those who are opposed to the modernisation of traditional agriculture, but the bias needs to be made explicit and clearly acknowledged, and the results of enquiry based on this sampling need to be presented and interpreted in that light. This is fundamental to the best practice of social science research. The problem is that this has not been done in the Prajateerpu report. Indeed, the report specifically dismisses the techniques of statistical sampling.

We are aware that the question of sampling and representativeness raises large issues that relate to the basic underpinnings of social science and that these are also embedded in larger debates around what constitutes sound social science, what is meant by verification, what the requirements are for validity and validation. These are not entirely new issues -- indeed, for at least thirty years they have been central to debates in the field of operational research. They are, however, issues that are assuming a renewed prominence -- a direct consequence of new experiments in participatory and policy-oriented research. It is these new efforts that make the entire area of action-directed research a challenging, frontier area methodologically and conceptually. It is also what makes it exciting and it is why we should continue to intensify our efforts in this area. But because it is frontier and highly disputed, it is all the more important that bias be declared and claims be prudent until its utilitarian boundaries are adequately established.

A Contribution from **Professor Paul Richards, Wageningen Agricultural University**, paul.richards@alg.tao.wau.NL - 6 August 2002

Comment:

How representative are "participatory" meetings? The way to find out is to do proper baseline social research. This (alas) was always the Achilles Heel of PRA - donors were keen to find "quick and dirty" ways of doing what an anthropologist might take several years to accomplish. We must now recognise this weakness and try and correct it. Agencies doing post-war rural recovery support work in Sierra Leone are fond of creating "Village Development Committees" to oversee distribution of humanitarian inputs on a "participatory" basis. But properly-designed social survey instruments soon reveal the lack of representativeness of such institutions. In one case - where only 6 per cent of the population speak any English - social survey revealed that an English-speaker was three times more likely to be able to access humanitarian inputs than villagers who only spoke the local language. In other words "participation" was biased - in this case - to those able to "do the discourse". Consensus conference organisers work hard, I know, to ensure "typicality" and "representativeness", but we need high-quality background data sets to find out what words like "typicality" and "representativeness" mean.
