

Overview – deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment

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Introduction

Democracy without citizen deliberation and participation is ultimately an empty and meaningless concept. This understanding of politics, and many people's desire to supplement the representation they receive via elected politicians, is often the starting point for a growing number of experiments and initiatives that create new spaces for citizens to directly influence decisions affecting their lives. These approaches aim to allow greater deliberation of policies and their practical implementation through the inclusion of a variety of social actors in consultation, planning and decision-making. In the 1990s, such deliberative and inclusionary processes (DIPs) have

been increasingly applied to the formulation of a wide range of policies in countries of both the North and South¹. This special edition of *PLA Notes* focuses on participatory methods and approaches that seek to enhance deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment².

Several procedures, techniques and methods are used to include diverse actors in deliberative processes. They include citizens' juries, citizen's panels, committees, consensus conferences, scenario workshops, deliberative polling, focus groups, multi-criteria mapping, public meetings, rapid and participatory rural appraisal (RRA and PRA), and visioning exercises (see Wakeford, this issue). These approaches and methods can differ substantially in detail and have been applied to a wide range of issues and contexts, as the contributions to this special edition of *PLA Notes* testify. However, to varying degrees they all, seek to adopt the criteria of deliberation and inclusion shown in Box 1.

Box 1 Some features of deliberative and inclusionary processes (DIPs)

1. Deliberation is defined as 'careful consideration' or 'the discussion of reasons for and against'. Deliberation is a common, if not inherent, component of all decision-making and democratic societies.
2. Inclusion is the action of involving others and an inclusionary decision-making process is based on the active involvement of multiple social actors and usually emphasises the participation of previously excluded citizens.
3. Social interaction occurs. This normally incorporates face-to-face meetings between those involved.
4. There is a dependence on language through discussion and debate. This is usually in the form of verbal and visual constructions rather than written text.
5. A deliberative process assumes that, at least initially, there are different positions held by the participants and that these views should be respected.
6. DIPs are designed to enable participants to evaluate and re-evaluate their positions in the light of different perspectives and new evidence.
7. The form of negotiation is often seen as containing value over and above the 'quality' of the decisions that emerge. Participants share a commitment to the resolution of problems through public reasoning and dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, even if consensus is not being sought
8. There is the recognition that, while the goal is usually to reach decisions or at least positions upon which decisions can subsequently be taken, an unhurried, reflective and reasonably open-ended discussion is required.

Modified from Holmes and Scoones, 2000 and references therein. IDS Working Paper 113. www.ids.ac.uk

Reasons for the recent interest in DIPs

A number of interrelated social and political factors have contributed to the recent support for, and use of, DIPs in policy making, planning, service delivery and technology assessments.

Political changes

In many countries, representative democracy has been heavily criticised for its inability to protect citizens' interests. Marginalised groups in both the North and the South often do not participate effectively in such representative democracy. The poor are often badly organised and ill served by the organisations that mobilise their votes and claim to represent their interests. The crisis of legitimacy faced by institutions in the eyes of poor people (and a growing number of middle-income citizens) is now widely documented. Drawing from participatory

1 For the purposes of *PLA Notes* we adopt the definition of Northern countries as being those most industrialised nations that are members of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

2 Most of the contributions to this special edition of *PLA Notes* are based on presentations at a workshop held at IIED (UK) on 25 September 2000: "The Forgotten Human Right? Methods for participation and citizen empowerment in the North and South".

research in 23 countries the recent 'Consultations with the poor' report, prepared for the World Development Report 2001, concludes:

From the perspectives of poor people world wide, there is a crisis in governance. While the range of institutions that play important roles in poor people's lives is vast, poor people are excluded from participation in governance. State institutions, whether represented by central ministries or local government are often neither responsive nor accountable to the poor; rather the report details the arrogance and disdain with which poor people are treated. Poor people see little recourse to injustice, criminality, abuse and corruption by institutions. Not surprisingly, poor men and women lack confidence in the state institutions even though they still express their willingness to partner with them under fairer rules³.

Some countries, particularly in the North, are beginning to see DIPs as a way to democratise policy-making by moving beyond representative democracy and traditional forms of consultation to give the historically excluded a voice. The current concerns of donors for 'good governance' and the strengthening of civil society also contribute to increasing interest in the use of DIPs for policy making (see Cornwall and Gaventa, this issue).

Although there have been some notable Government initiatives (see Lenaghan, this issue), civil society organisations, in the North and the South, have been largely responsible for the growing interest in a wide range of participatory methodologies. Over time, these organisations have begun to take on a greater advocacy role, demanding that citizens' voices be heard during the formulation of government policies and the design of technologies to meet human needs in environmentally sustainable ways. These social actors also argue that DIPs have the potential to improve the quality of decision-making and increase the likelihood that policy formulation and implementation will be more legitimate, effective, efficient and sustainable.

Lack of trust in professional expertise and science

The growing public mistrust, cynicism and perception of declining legitimacy regarding professional and scientific expertise also partly explain the rising interest in DIPs. This is particularly the case in countries where the lack of trust in government institutions is associated with the growing link between the state and scientific expertise in policy-making. Western science plays a central role in determining much of the content and practice of service

delivery (e.g. health care systems) and the design of technologies that make up the built environment in which citizens live, work and spend their leisure time. Science has thus become increasingly drawn into policy-making as experts (scientists, engineers, health professionals, urban planners...) make decisions about social, economic and environmental issues to provide policy-makers with options. This involvement of scientific expertise has tended to remove decisions from democratic politics, allowing instead more opaque technocratic decision making to prevail in many cases.

Trust in scientific expertise has been further eroded in the eyes of citizens because of the following.

- People in industrialised and post-industrialised countries no longer view science as representing certain knowledge (see Irwin, this issue). Citizens are faced with a wide range of opinions from experts and counter experts in major scientific controversies. This undermines the positivist view of knowledge with its claims that any group of experts faced with the same problem should arrive at the same conclusions. The public understanding of science has also been increasingly informed by radical critiques which present science as an *embodiment of values* in theories, things, therapies, systems, software and institutions. And all these values are part of ideologies or worldviews, with scientists immersed in the same cultural and economic conflicts, contradictions and compromises as ordinary citizens.
- Citizens feel themselves 'at risk' from science-based social and technological developments. For example, the recent crises in European countries over BSE and GMOs have seriously undermined public confidence in scientific expertise (see Irwin, this issue). This has been compounded by evidence of collusion between some key government scientific experts and the commercial interests of industry. Citizens are increasingly sceptical of scientific solutions when 'experts' have contributed to creating public health, social and environmental crisis in the first place.

In both the North and the South, solutions to overcome low public confidence in government institutions and scientific expertise have often emphasised a more deliberative and inclusive form of debate and policy-making. The value of formal science is recognised, but so is the importance of citizens' perspectives as alternative ways of framing issues (see Mirenowicz, this issue; Satya Murty and Wakeford, this issue; Sclove, this issue). Advocates argue that DIPs allow multiple perspectives into debates thereby generating better understandings of the uncertainties of science-policy questions (see Stirling, this issue). The potential of DIPs to broaden democratic control over the directions of science and technology is also emphasised in this context (see Cunningham-Burley, this issue).

3 Narayan, D. C., Chambers. R., Shah, MK & Petesch, P (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out For Change*. Washington, DC, World Bank. p.172

Uncertainty and complexity

The introduction of new technologies and *all* policy processes involves making decisions without being able to predict the effects of different courses of action. As the problems and systems dealt with become more complex and unstable, levels of uncertainty increase significantly. Environmental uncertainties and technological risks are particularly noteworthy in this connection. Environmental dynamics and effects are usually complex and long-term. Biophysical processes, such as climate change or interactions between GMOs and environment, are often characterised by non-equilibrium dynamics and high levels of instability. Predicting the long-term impacts of radioactive substances and their decay products on the living environment is beyond the power of existing science (see Wallace, this issue). The traditional approaches of risk management and cost benefit analysis are inadequate 'when we don't know what we don't know' and where 'we don't know the probabilities of possible outcomes'.

Given such uncertainty in the face of complexity, 'experts' are seen as no better equipped to decide on questions of values and interests than any other groups of citizens (see Irwin, this issue; Stirling, this issue). Perceptions of both the problem and the appropriate solution are value laden and differ enormously within society.

Advocates claim that the use of DIPs under conditions where there is uncertainty and ignorance can help:

- elicit citizens' values and views on desirable futures, whilst establishing spaces and forums for their debate and arbitration.
- generate new knowledge to inform social, environmental, economic and science policy through the interaction of diverse social actors, including local residents, citizens and divergent interest groups. Inclusive and participatory approaches may ensure that knowledge and policy processes more adequately respond to local realities as well as local definitions of well being and progress.

Human rights, social justice and empowerment

For advocates of DIPs, human rights, justice and democratic accountability are enhanced when the formulation of policies and the design of technologies involve inclusive deliberation. When conditions are enabling, citizen juries, scenario workshops and other participatory methods create a space for those with no or a weak voice to influence policy. Inclusive deliberation potentially allows men, women, the old and children to exercise their 'human right' to participate, -as citizens-, in decisions about society, the environment and the organisation of economic life. People are no longer viewed as mere users and choosers of policies and technologies; they become active 'makers and shapers' of

the realities that affect their lives (Cornwall and Gaventa, this issue). Much of this argument draws its legitimacy from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This vision of deliberative democracy also resonates with longstanding political traditions in which direct citizen empowerment and action are seen as the central objectives of a just and free society that celebrates diversity, empathy and virtue.

At a more practical level, participation in policy-making and the design of technologies for the real world is also valued as an end in itself through its ability to empower participants through what they learn during deliberations. Citizens' values and preferences are often transformed during DIPs. This phenomenon does not just apply to citizen participants. DIPs can also provide an important learning experience for the participating policy-makers, bureaucrats and professionals, challenging their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour through debate and interaction with lay people and 'ordinary' citizens. This experiential learning, when renewed and rewarded as part of a larger process of institutional change (see Pimbert, this issue), is one of the pre-requisites for bureaucrats and professionals to work differently and go beyond their fears to share power in an age of increasing complexity and uncertainty.

Major issues arising in the articles

The 17 articles in the theme section of this issue of *PLA Notes* illustrate the range of situations in which deliberative and inclusive processes have been used to foster democratic debate and action. Examples reported from the South focus primarily on land use/tenure, livestock, wildlife, air pollution and biotechnology. Examples from the North emphasise issues such as radioactive waste disposal, health care, new information technology, drugs policy, biotechnology, genetic testing on human beings and urban planning.

A wider range of DIPs is more often used in the North than in the South

There are relatively few examples of DIPs other than PRA/RRAs being used in countries of the South. This remarkable difference between the North and South is reflected in this collection of papers. Southern examples include one account of a citizen jury on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in South India (Satya Murty and Wakeford, this issue) and an analysis of the use of PRA/RRAs in deliberations on environmental policies in Chile, Zimbabwe, Mali, Madagascar, Guinea, India and Pakistan (Holmes and Scoones, this issue). The remaining articles focus on experiences in the North where the use of other methods for DIPs (e.g. scenario workshops, consensus conferences, focus groups) is more prevalent. The traditions of representative democracy in Europe, North America and Australia may explain these

differences. Scenario workshops, consensus conferences, citizen juries, deliberative opinion polls and other DIPs seem more prevalent in Denmark and Switzerland precisely because these countries have a strong tradition of integrating representative and direct democracy (see Andersen and Jaeger, this issue; Holmes and Scoones, this issue). Moves towards greater decentralisation and democratisation in countries of the South may create a new political climate that requires policy makers to be more accountable to the public they serve. These political shifts may encourage greater use of DIPs in southern contexts in the future.

The value of history

All the articles assembled here primarily focus on contemporary experiences with DIPs. There are few explicit references to previous moments in history when citizens directly engaged in deliberative decision making. And yet previous experience may help improve the quality of present day initiatives, whilst providing a historical perspective in arguments for and against DIPs (see Box 2).

Policy spaces created from above and below

Several examples of DIPs reported here have been convened by government agencies (see Delap, this issue; Irwin, this issue; Mirenowicz, this issue; Wallace, this issue). In some countries of the South, some of these processes have been partially initiated by international donor agencies working with the policy-making agency (see examples reported in Holmes and Scoones, this issue). In many of these cases the deliberative processes primarily

fulfilled consensual and instrumental objectives. These are examples of DIPs constituting policy spaces created from above, and in which the state has substantial control over how DIPs are to fit into policy making and the design of technologies to meet human needs.

As convenors, the organising agencies determine much of the style and content of the deliberative process through choice of objectives, methods and tools, the allocation of resources and the scale of operation, and the links to the wider policy processes. This is also true for DIPs that have been initiated by organisations outside government policy-making bodies. Glasner (this issue) describes how a Welsh citizen jury on genetic testing ultimately functioned as a technology of legitimisation for the commercial interests of the transnational pharmaceutical corporation that commissioned the jury process. Irwin (this issue) describes how a UK Government's much-heralded experiment in deliberative democracy ended up being condemned by its own Parliamentary committee as 'closer to market research than public consultation'.

Elsewhere – in policy spaces created from below – the debate about wider questions of ethics, values, and their links with issues of justice, morality and rights, is a striking feature of DIPs organised by civil society organisations, NGOs and radicalised professionals (see Cunningham-Burley, this issue; Sclove, this issue; Satya Murty and Wakeford, this issue). Whilst these latter examples of DIPs extend the frame of decision-making, they have relatively weak links with the formal policy process. Therein lies a danger that these democratic deliberations will simply be

Box 2 Learning from past experiences in deliberative democracy

Various citizens' groups have developed their own form of citizen participation in the formation of technology policy over the years. For example, E. P. Thompson's historical analysis illustrated how the Luddites of nineteenth century England sought to subject new technologies to a public trial, just as they had put food prices on trial in previous generations⁴. Far from opposing all new technology, recent studies have suggested that the Luddites were in favour of certain innovations as long as they did not threaten their quality of life⁵. As historian Steve Woolgar has put it, 'The conventional arguments that assert the Luddites to be irrational resisters to progress – because they mistakenly assumed either capitalism or machinery to be irrational – are based on essentialist notions of progress... The Luddites failed not because they misrecognised the machine [as their enemy] but because the alliance of forces arrayed against them was too great for their interpretation to prevail'⁶.

Leading thinkers from John Dewey to Lewis Mumford made the need for direct citizen participation clear throughout the last century. Writing in the United States in 1909, Dewey pointed to the dangers that arose whenever experts become detached from the concerns of the public, or when the public is excluded from the process of long-term social planning. Unless both sides are engaged in continuous and mutually educative dialogue, neither experts nor citizens are, he

suggested, capable of utilising the full range of tools available to them. He also proposed that experts could never achieve monopoly control over knowledge required for adequate social planning because of the extent to which 'they become a specialised class, they are shut off from knowledge of the needs they are supposed to serve'. When insulated and unaccountable, he argued, this 'cadre of experts' became not a public resource, but a public problem.

While accepting that citizens must often depend on experts for the gathering of facts and construction of scenarios, Dewey attacked those who dismissed the public's capability to participate in policy-making. He suggested that, given the prevailing culture of secrecy and propaganda, citizens had not been given a fair chance to fulfil their potential in this role. It was impossible to presume the quality of contribution citizens might make if balanced information were available. In the decades since Dewey wrote, citizens have shown themselves to be highly capable of understanding complex scientific and technical information.

4 Thompson, E. P. 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, London

5 Sale, K. 1996 *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and their War on the Industrial Revolution – Lessons for the Computer Age*. Addison Wesley, New York.

6 Woolgar, S. 1997 *The Luddites: Diablo ex Machina* in Grint K. & Woolgar, S. *The Machine at Work: technology, work and organization* Polity Press, Cambridge.

ignored because they are delivering the 'wrong message' or information that cannot be accommodated by bureaucratic decision making, major industrial lobbies and transnational commercial interests (see Pimbert, this issue).

Who frames the issue?

The extent to which assumptions behind issues can be challenged and new questions asked in DIPs is highly dependent on the choice of subject area or/and the particular way a problem is defined (see Irwin, this issue; Glasner, this issue; Mirenowicz, this issue; Wallace, this issue; Stirling, this issue). The initial choice of problems and definition of criteria drives the end results. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the multi criteria mapping example described by Stirling (this issue). Assessments of GMO in the UK were most strongly influenced by each participant's early framing of the debate. Many criteria chosen by the participants lied outside the scope of official risk assessments and for no participant is their whole range of criteria explicitly included in the formal evaluation process of GMOs in the UK. The 'sensitivity' of the early framing of issues and questions in DIPs emphasises the importance of ensuring that the entire spectrum of values and interests are represented. The extent to which organising agencies (or citizen groups) allow for flexible and open-ended 'framing' and definition of boundaries may ultimately prove to be a good indicator of their commitment to democratic values.

Resource constraints

Few of the papers assembled here discuss the amount of resources needed to facilitate different types of DIPs. Comparing citizen panels in Denmark and the USA, Sclove (this issue) argues that the costs of organising and running these events are relatively small when fairer and more democratic decisions can be obtained in the long run. However, the short-term costs of DIPs can be high. For example, the citizen juries described for the UK by Delap (this issue) cost between £5,000 and £30,000.

The time scale over which DIPs are run, and the demands on citizens' time, can make it more difficult for poorer citizens to secure their income and livelihoods. Women burdened with domestic, child caring and other tasks may find it difficult to engage in time consuming deliberative processes. Institutional and economic reforms that generate free time for citizen engagement regardless of sex, age and origin are identified as an important enabling condition for widespread deliberative and inclusive democracy (see Pimbert, this issue).

Facilitators of DIPs are a key resource too. The commitment of these facilitators is crucial and so are their skills in managing participatory processes, consensus building, allowing for creative dissent and conflict resolution. Helping normal professionals develop these

new skills, and the corresponding enabling attitudes and behaviour, imply significant training costs and resource allocations to transform organisations in both the government and NGO sectors (see Pimbert, this issue).

Stakeholder oversight

Many of the guidelines for DIPs, such as those laid down by the Institute of Public Policy Research (Delap, this issue) and Citizen Foresight (Satya Murty & Wakeford, this issue), include provision for the process to be overseen by a stakeholder panel. The inclusion of stakeholders with a diverse range of interests on this panel can be an important means of ensuring the methodology is not captured by a group with a particular perspective or vested interest. However, for this purpose, for most DIPs it is crucially important to widen the concept of stakeholder to include those who are 'stake-less', having been marginalised by prevailing socio-economic forces. Only if there is a balance on any oversight body between those whose human rights are at risk and those with power, will it be likely to produce a process that is both fair and seen to be fair.

Evaluating DIPs

There have been few external evaluations of past attempts at DIPs and of their impacts on policy and practice. Wakeford (this issue) uses six evaluation criteria to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of experiences described here:

- diverse control;
- framing and scope;
- interactivity and interrogation;
- reference timeframe;
- transparency; and,
- empowerment and advocacy.

However, the need to rely on the supposed 'independence' of an external evaluator for legitimacy can be reduced if the kind of stakeholder panel described above is involved at an early stage. Each stakeholder has an interest in ensuring that the process is carried out fairly from their own standpoint. The combined contributions of stakeholders and the 'stake-less' should at least ensure that DIPs are run in a fair and balanced manner.

Attitudes to DIPs

However many criteria are laid down for their evaluation, DIPs rely on the fundamental attitudes of individuals engaged in both their design, execution and the carrying out of their recommendations. Just as teams of international observers monitoring the fairness of elections may have interests that make their approval or disapproval of an election result suspect, so facilitators and evaluators of DIPs can always attempt to use them for their own ends. In a world where the interests of a minority of the most powerful people and organisations conflict with the

well-being of the less powerful majority, this is perhaps the biggest challenge of all (see Pimbert, this issue).

Linking DIPs to broader processes of policy change

In their critical review of 35 case studies, Holmes and Scoones (this issue) argue that there has been little reflection on:

- how DIPs are located within broader policy processes; and,
- how citizens involved in participatory dialogues are linked to wider policy networks and the dynamics of policy change.

All the examples of DIPs reported here are necessarily only a small part of the policy process and many of them are one-off affairs. Few articles discuss how outcomes of these participatory events were used to influence advisory committees and technical bodies connected to policy making (see Satya Murty and Wakeford, this issue; Irwin, this issue; Holmes and Scoones, this issue). One option is for groups of actors to use DIPs when appropriate, as part of a larger set of activities aimed at influencing policy 'from below': campaigns, hidden resistance or direct civil action (see Wallace, this issue). Another option implied by the more positive aspects of the citizen jury experience in the UK (see Delap, this issue), is to combine formal bodies of representative democracy with the more bottom-up deliberative and inclusive methods and processes. This approach may be particularly effective at the level of local and municipal governments, where citizen participation and government accountability can be mutually reinforcing and supportive.

Reflections on how to integrate participatory approaches in decision making inevitably raise deeper questions about democratic governance as well as the political and economic conditions under which an active citizenship can flourish (see Cornwall and Gaventa, this issue; Pimbert, this issue). Conceptual and methodological innovations in these areas are more likely to emerge if both the framing of issues and boundary conditions are left flexible and open ended. However, general guidance for answering these questions in specific contexts can be found in documents such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the growing literature on environmental justice.

Conclusion

Three sets of challenges stand out for the theory and practice of DIPs.

- *Methodological innovations.* How can DIPs be used to further the self mobilising 'bottom up' processes of public participation and tie these in with more formal 'top down' processes of policy deliberation and decision

making? Which methods are appropriate, when, where and in which sequences?

- *Preconditions for citizen voice and empowerment.* There is a need to better understand the conditions under which citizen voice can be realised in different contexts. This entails looking beyond political and social prerequisites to bridging the gap between citizenship, participation and accountability, fundamental as they are. Economic and technological conditions for democracy and citizen empowerment also need to be identified and promoted.
- *Ethics, values and intentionality.* Simply put, participatory methods such as DIPs can be used either for instrumental ends or for genuine citizen empowerment. Implicit or explicit intentions and underlying values always inform 'participation', the framing of issues, the form of any initiative and its operating principles. As citizens, we need to be clear about which values and intentions support or undermine a) the right to participate at all levels of the policy making process as equal partners regardless of sex or origin, b) the right to self representation and autonomy and c) the right to political, economic and cultural self determination (sovereignty).

These challenging questions are at the heart of serious and honest debates on deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment. We hope that this special issue of *PLA Notes* will encourage more critical reflection and practice in this area.

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