



Learning from experiments in deliberate democracy: an e-forum on participatory processes for policy change

by IAN SCOONES and JOHN THOMPSON

Deliberative democracy: learning from experiments

In February 2001, our two organisations, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), co-published a special issue of *PLA Notes* on Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment (*PLA Notes 40*), which focused on innovative ways to actively engage 'the public' in policy formulation.¹ The special issue drew together current thinking on public participation in policy processes and highlighted a range of techniques known collectively as Deliberative and Inclusionary Processes (DIPs), which include consensus conferences, scenario workshops, and citizen juries, among others. As the articles in that issue revealed, however, until recently most practical experiences with these methods were to be found in industrialised countries, although the editors and authors argued that they were equally relevant to policy contexts in the developing world.

Since the publishing of *PLA Notes 40*, DIPs have been adapted and applied in a range of developing country contexts, from South America to South Asia, where they have been used to engage poor people in policy dialogues

about controversial and complex issues ranging from genetically modified organisms to the future of food and agriculture in marginal environments. This special issue features a set of methodological and conceptual reflections and lessons on the use of DIPs, which grew out of a citizen jury and scenario workshop in southern India. Unlike previous *PLA Notes*, the articles in this issue are not the usual collection of case studies and examples of 'methods in action', but a set of conceptual and methodological reflections on that Indian experiment and its implications for citizen engagement in policy processes that were contributed by a diverse group of researchers and practitioners to an Internet-based electronic forum or 'e-forum', which we convened and co-moderated in the latter half of 2002.² Because many *PLA Notes* readers do not have reliable access to the internet and therefore were unable to contribute to or read the original online debate, and because we believe the insights generated in the forum are important and deserve a wider audience, we have decided to reproduce the main contributions to that electronic exchange in this special issue.

¹ *PLA Notes 40: Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment*. The issue can be downloaded free of charge from the *PLA Notes* website at: www.planotes.org.

² The e-forum may also be viewed online at: www.iied.org/agri/e_forum/summary.html. Please note that the conference is now closed and no further contributions are being accepted.

The citizens' jury gather at Algotte village, AP to hear evidence from one of the expert witnesses



Raising the debate

It is not often that a single publication sparks such controversy, particularly one that is essentially the proceedings of a one-week workshop. But that is precisely what happened after members of a team from India and the UK published and distributed the report of their scenario workshop and citizen jury experiment – *Prajateerpu* – in Andhra Pradesh, India. The release of that report ignited an international debate over the use of participatory approaches to inform and influence policy from below. Supporters and sceptics lined up to set out their opposing views. Strong opinions were expressed and questions were raised about citizen engagement in policy processes, about the trustworthiness of participatory 'verdicts' and the implications that could be drawn from them, about integrity in the research process, about academic freedom, about the links between research and advocacy, and about ways to increase accountability and transparency in policy making.

Such vigorous and impassioned debate can be constructive, as it can lead to the opening up of new intellectual horizons, an appreciation of alternative points of view, the identification of common ground, and even a shifting of positions. In the case of *Prajateerpu*, the hue and cry was so great and so widespread that there was a serious danger that the important lessons emerging from the experience would be lost altogether. The flames were fanned further by the extensive use of unsolicited email letters, many of them sent anonymously, which only served to reinforce the already polarised positions. As a result, there was a very real possibility that the proverbial 'baby' was about to be tossed out with the 'bathwater'.

As keen supporters and observers of the *Prajateerpu* process, we became alarmed by this turn of events and felt

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compelled to act to shift the deliberations in a more constructive direction. In particular, we sought to draw attention to the important methodological, conceptual, and substantive lessons emerging out of the citizen jury and scenario workshop experiment from which those concerned with environmental and social justice and citizen participation in policy processes could gain fresh insights. This led us to propose a time-bound, electronic forum, which we would moderate, to encourage all interested parties to contribute ideas and opinions on key issues arising from the *Prajateerpu* experience. The result was the e-forum on Participatory Processes for Policy Change.

An electronic forum

The e-forum ran over 40 days (and nights) during August and the first part of September 2002. All those involved in the debate through informal email and other means were invited to participate at the outset. This included the *Prajateerpu* partners in Andhra Pradesh, the directors and staff of IDS and IIED, NGO and donor personnel, academics, and other interested observers. Many responded and made contributions, others chose not to. In any deliberative forum participation is always voluntary, and one strategy is to disengage and seek other routes through which views are aired. In whatever way and by whatever means individuals choose to express their views, one thing is clear: the debates generated by *Prajateerpu* will continue to run for some time to come, as the report and the subsequent discussions raised a number of critical issues which have yet to be fully explored.

What almost every commentator participating in the e-forum agreed was that the *Prajateerpu* exercise was a noteworthy effort to develop and extend methodologies for participation in policy making. The innovative attempt to combine scenario workshoping with a citizens' jury model was perhaps the first of its kind, certainly in the developing world. The experience highlighted the challenges of ensuring an inclusive debate about controversial and complex issues, as well as the potentials of deliberative fora in enhancing policy design and implementation. That it has

Members of the jury and the oversight panel on a field visit in Andhra Pradesh



generated such vigorous debate and intensive scrutiny of conceptual, methodological, and substantive issues is witness to the significance of this experiment. Our aim has been to capitalise on the many positive aspects of deliberative, inclusive, people-centred procedures. Nearly everyone is clear that the future will require more such experiments, particularly those which are embedded more directly into the policy process.

The e-forum debate was convened around a series of four themes: (i) issues of representation; (ii) issues of evidence; (iii) issues of engagement and (iv) issues of accountability. These were chosen as open-ended, but generic themes, to allow those not directly involved in the *Prajateerpu* exercise or in Andhra Pradesh to share their knowledge and insights from experiences in other parts of the world. The themes inevitably overlap and many people's comments cut across several (and occasionally all four) areas. That said, the themes did allow for some level of focus in

the discussion and an opportunity for debate about particular issues that were raised informally in the early exchanges prior to the e-forum.³

Clear principles of engagement were also set out at the beginning of the e-forum process. These sought to lay the ground rules of the electronic exchange to assure contributors that we as moderators would not seek to impose our points of view on anyone or edit any submissions in relation to their thematic content or opinion. However, we did reserve the right to edit submissions according to their relevance to the discussion and for language and reject slanderous, obscene, or incomprehensible correspondence. These principles helped ensure that the quality of the debate was maintained at a high standard.

This special issue of *PLA Notes* presents the main contributions to the e-forum, including the full set of thematic debates, commentaries by the *Prajateerpu* authors and the UK Department for International Development, and our summary of the key lessons emerging from the e-conference. In addition, we have invited the lead authors of the original *Prajateerpu* report, Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford, to provide an overview of the citizen jury and scenario workshop process, to help set the scene for what follows. Readers will note that the language used by some of the discussants is rather complex as it relates to various traditions in social science theory and practice. Where possible, we have tried to clarify these points and add appropriate references, without altering the main thrust of the arguments.

We believe the full collection of contributions and commentaries offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of employing deliberative and inclusive procedures to give citizens, particularly those from the more vulnerable and marginal parts of society, a voice in the policy process.

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³ In the final format of the website we arranged the material in reverse chronological order of their contribution, with a search facility included to find particular contributors.

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Glossary
of terms**Accountability**

The state of being accountable; liability to be called on to render an account; the responsibility to someone or for some activity.

Action research

Action research can be described as a family of research methodologies, which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. It is 'learning by doing'.

Analogue

That which is analogous to, or corresponds with, some other thing. Words with similar definitions include: counterpart; equivalent; twin; correspondent; parallel.

Democratic inquiry

The act of inquiring; a seeking for information by asking questions; interrogation; a question or questioning, conducted in a democratic way.

Dissensus

In this instance, it is taken to mean the opposite of consensus, meaning agreement of the majority in sentiment or belief.

Epistemology

The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. Epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.

Facipulate:

Facilitating which involves manipulating the process so as to achieve a desired outcome.

Neo-liberal

Having or showing belief in the need for economic growth in addition to

traditional liberalistic values; a liberal who subscribes to neo-liberalism.

Normative

Used in ethics and social sciences to refer to some sort of value judgement over an idealised standard or norm of behaviour. Contrasts with 'descriptive', 'analytic' or 'substantive' approaches, which do not imply a reliance on explicit value judgements.

Paradigm

World view underlying the theories and methodology of a particular social science or scientific subject. Researchers sometimes talk about a paradigm shift, by which they mean a fundamental change in world views or underlying assumptions.

Partisan lobbying

This refers to the business where special interest groups seek to influence decision making in favour of their own ends through direct representation and lobbying, without much effort going into understanding other interests or perspectives.

Participatory deliberation

An approach to making or informing decisions which is participatory (in that it includes all those with an interest, especially often-excluded groups) and deliberative (in that it prioritises effective communication between different perspectives and rests on qualitative judgement rather than quantitative analysis).

Pathology

Referring to something negative, like a disease, which warrants a treatment or 'cure'.

Pluralistic

This refers to a situation in which

many diverse viewpoints and interests are afforded equal status and attention, without attempts to reduce them to a single 'consensus' or 'majority' view.

Policy appraisal

A general term for the business of assessing different policy options in advance of a policy decision and which includes qualitative deliberation as well as quantitative assessment or analysis. Contrasts with 'evaluation', which tends to come after the decision.

Populist

A supporter of the rights and power of the people; an advocate of democratic principles.

Positivist

A doctrine contending that sense perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought; any of several doctrines or viewpoints that stress attention to actual practice over consideration of what is ideal.

Prajateerpu

The *Telegu* word for 'people's verdict'; it is used here to refer to the citizens' jury process.

Praxis

Practice, as distinguished from theory. Accepted practice or custom.

Positivist paradigm

A belief in an objective reality, knowledge of which is only gained from direct, verifiable experience, subject to empirical testing and quantitative measures. It is considered by many to be the antithesis of the principles of action research.

Reflexive

Used to refer to a method or theory in social science that takes account of itself or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated.

Reify

To make artificially concrete; to treat

something questionable as unproblematic.

Scientism

A philosophy that claims that science alone can render truth about the world and reality, adhering only to the empirical, or testable. Scientism disputes almost all metaphysical,

philosophical, and religious claims as unverifiable by scientific methods and argues that science is the only means of access to truth.

Social audits

A local public review of the quality of government decision-making.