

9

Reflections on the e-forum on participatory processes for policy change by the authors of the *Prajateerpu* report

by MICHEL PIMBERT and TOM WAKEFORD

We thank all contributors to this e-forum for their engagement with the *Prajateerpu* debate and their often insightful comments. We are humbled and re-invigorated by the expressions of support and solidarity from so many people, many of whom we have never met. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute some brief reflections on our experience of the *Prajateerpu* process. However, readers should be clear that we are no more than two members of a wide network of those who constructed *Prajateerpu* – most of whom are in Andhra Pradesh. Many of these Indian individuals and organisations are also keen to share their perspectives over a more extended timescale – both in their native languages such as Telegu, Urdu, and Hindi – and in English, where possible. The following remarks are made in our personal capacity, not in the name of the *Prajateerpu* organising team.

Having been trained as natural scientists, both of us were schooled in the rigorous disciplines of exact science and positivist forms of rationality. Like many others we have both found that such an approach to learning and action can often obscure as much as enlighten. To us it is clear that attempts to democratically construct a pluralistic set of truths and subjectivities are far more likely to produce robust knowledge than the positivist's search for a singularly objective standpoint or observer-independent truth. As individuals, and more recently in collaboration with each other and Indian partners, we have been exploring

more holistic, inclusive, and democratic ways of knowing and acting in the world. In helping design the *Prajateerpu* process, we have drawn on the evolving paradigm of participatory action research. The accusation made by some of our critics that our report lacks 'objectivity' and 'independence' misunderstands the participatory action research process. *Prajateerpu's* methodology has been an attempt to allow the democratic scrutiny of both facts and values, bringing together critical analysis and an empathic, receptive eye that seeks to understand as much as possible from within. We believe that has succeeded in producing new knowledge and the opening up of the possibility of transformative action through research. This participatory research paradigm draws on the emancipatory traditions of Freire, Habermas, and others.¹

¹ Guest editors' note: Paulo Freire (1921–1997), the Brazilian educationalist, has left a significant mark on thinking about progressive practice. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th Anniversary edition, 2000, Continuum: London) is currently one of the most quoted educational texts (especially in the developing world). Freire was able to draw upon, and weave together, a number of strands of thinking about educational practice and liberation. Jürgen Habermas (1922–) is a German philosopher, social theorist, and a leading representative of the 'Frankfurt School'. This school of thought developed at the Institute for Social Research, in Frankfurt, Germany, and introduced a style of analysis known as Critical Theory. In his recent work Habermas has turned his influential *Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. 1 (1984) Beacon Press: Boston; Vol. 2 (1987) Policy Press: Cambridge; translated by Thomas McCarthy) to the domains of politics and law. He has become an advocate of 'deliberative democracy', in which a government's laws and institutions would be a reflection of free and open public discussion. In the democracy he envisions, men and women, aware of their interest in autonomy (self-governance) and responsibility, would agree to adhere only to the better-reasoned argument.

Jury field visit

Tom Wakeford, *Prajateerpu* report co-author

For them, knowledge and the process of coming to know should also serve democracy and the practical goals of social and ecological justice. By existing at the cutting edge of this new mode of enquiry *Prajateerpu* has become part of a series of controversies that we believe will strengthen action-research processes in the long term.

In designing *Prajateerpu* as a deliberative and participatory process, our strategy was aimed at overcoming the partial and incomplete nature of different methodologies (e.g. scenario workshops, participatory video, citizens' juries, stakeholder panels) by combining them in a particular sequence so that the internal rigour and credibility of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Overall, we think that robust and practically useful lessons have emerged out of the complex and dynamic interactions between the methods, arguments, actors, and extended peer community that, together, formed the *Prajateerpu* process.

None of the organisers of *Prajateerpu* claim to have designed and facilitated a perfect and flawless deliberative process. Our report describes mistakes, limitations, and omissions. As Robert Chambers says [in the 'Issues of Evidence' section, p.23] we have been very open in describing the shortcomings of *Prajateerpu*, encouraging criticism from our partners and colleagues as a pre-condition for open learning and constructive dialogue. In two instances we made a statement or implied a motive without providing all the evidence we had assembled. This was largely because those of whom we were critical might consider the evidence private. We regret that – for the sake of brevity – we did not always make the reasons for such absences clear. Correspondence that followed the publication of the *Prajateerpu* report allowed us to clarify or further a number of important matters of fact, those disputed

by UK Department for International Development (DFID)-India in particular. Nowhere in our report do we say that DFID does not use participatory methods. Our comments on the lack of 'use of appropriate methodologies to bring the voices of the poor into the planning and design of aid programmes' refer to questions of scale, quality of participation, and independent oversight of participatory processes.

With hindsight we realise how important it was to involve a panel of independent observers to check for bias and misrepresentation, quality of deliberation and pluralism, and vouch for the credibility and trustworthiness of the *Prajateerpu* methodology. This extended peer community, which included representatives of marginalised communities and more powerful actors, had the power to decide which methods and processes (representativeness of jury, video scenarios, balance of witnesses, quality of facilitation) were appropriate and what constitutes valid knowledge in that context. Through this innovation we sought to decentralise and democratise the knowledge validation process, as well as ensure that the *Prajateerpu's* outputs were as legitimate and representative as possible.

A second level of peer review took place prior to publishing the *Prajateerpu* report, and involved a diverse range of colleagues in India and the UK. However, we are not claiming that this makes this *Prajateerpu* report uniquely 'objective'. In positivist science, what is called 'objectivity' is actually consensus between different people who rely on their own subjectivity and value-laden theories to decide what is (or what is not) trustworthy and universally valid knowledge.

When judging participatory action research, the use of positivist notions of validity and objectivity are, at best, intelligent looks in the wrong direction. At worst, they can become

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destructive and ill-informed attempts to 'shoot the messenger and the methods' in order to silence findings that risk causing discomfort to those in power in high places. The need to widen the criteria used to assess the validity and quality of participatory action research is clear. Contributors to this e-forum eloquently argue for such an epistemological broadening, and make specific suggestions (cf. Peter Reason, John Gaventa, Carine Pionetti, and Andy Stirling). In our ongoing analysis of participatory action research processes, we are looking forward to combining these suggested approaches with the criteria we used to evaluate the quality and validity of *Prajateerpu* (see section four of the report) and its enduring impacts. For example, has the launch of the *Prajateerpu* report in the UK Houses of Parliament [in 2002] in the pres-

ence of one of the jury members contributed to the emergence of a wide community of cooperative inquiry over the nature of British aid to the Government of Andhra Pradesh? How is the authenticity of the jury's voices and verdict influencing an emerging democratic debate on food, farming and rural futures in Andhra Pradesh?

We need to ask why the richness, vibrancy, and plain talking of the jury members on the need for a politics of autonomy have been largely ignored in discussions on the validity of *Prajateerpu* and its policy implications? (cf. Carine Pionetti, Biksham Gujja, and Robert Chambers). With Grazia Borrini and Brian Wynne, we ask what can be done in future to ensure that 'the powerful do not always come up on top by using their phenomenal capacity to "create" public opinions through all sort of direct and subliminal means?'

The small and marginal farmers involved in *Prajateerpu* have offered a broad vision of a very different future from the one planned for them from above. Equally remarkable was their wish that more *Prajateerpu* exercises be done all over Andhra Pradesh. They, and the facilitators, were conscious that whatever had been done and said was partial and incomplete. One of the key challenges ahead is to facilitate similar democratic processes in each district of Andhra Pradesh, including diverse people and places in the choice of policies, technologies, and institutions that shape social life and relationships with nature.

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