

Reclaiming our right to power: some conditions for deliberative democracy

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Introduction

Deliberative and inclusive processes (DIPs) are increasingly being used in the North and the South to give the historically excluded a voice in decisions. Some of these methods and processes include citizens' juries, consensus conferences, scenario workshops, multi-criteria mapping, participatory rural appraisal, visioning exercises and deliberative polling. Many of these 'participatory' processes have been developed in an attempt to supplement conventional democratic processes, moving beyond traditional forms of consultation. Whilst DIPs have at times been misused or abused in the rush to scale up and spread the new innovations, these approaches nevertheless offer much potential to expand the active involvement of citizens in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. But *how* and *under what conditions* can the democratic potential of these approaches and methods be enlarged to include more people and places? This paper critically reflects on these questions, offering both reformist and more radical proposals for the mainstreaming of deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment.

Enabling policies, organisations and professional practice

Decentralisation policies such as the Law of Popular Participation in Bolivia generally offer a more enabling context for deliberative and inclusive processes in decision making. The democratic potential of decentralisation is usually greatest when it is linked with the institutionalisation of local level popular participation and community mobilisation. These dynamics can be complementary in encouraging more widespread DIPs, – one working from the top down and the other from the bottom up. Similarly, the participatory budgeting pioneered by several municipalities in Brazil offers a model of how citizens can more directly influence municipal spending, – funds for whom, on what and where (see Box 1). By fostering more debate and oversight over public spending, participatory budgeting can enhance trust between citizens and local government. As such it is an important institutional innovation for more deliberative forms of democracy and citizen empowerment in both urban and rural contexts.

Box 1 Participatory budgeting in Brazil

Municipal governments elected to power in several Brazilian cities in the 1990s introduced a participatory budget. This basically allowed the views and priorities of citizens to be incorporated in the design of annual budgets and public spending priorities. Participation is usually promoted by a team selected from the municipality. The team has direct contacts with the population and also carries out information campaigns to raise the awareness of citizens about their right to participate in the design of the budget. The team organises meetings in the different neighbourhoods to facilitate people's selection of their own development priorities and representatives. The citizens' delegates are included in the process of budget design and approval in order to guarantee that the demands of the localities/neighbourhoods are taken into account. The methodology for incorporating participation into the budget planning is evaluated and updated every year.

The government invests in projects which communities have identified as their priority needs. Given a citizen's right to have information and make demands on the State, government agencies have to consider the feasibility of any request. If a citizen request is judged non-feasible, the state agency has to demonstrate why this is so.

In several municipalities, popular participation in this initiative has exceeded the government's expectations and has increased annually. Participatory budgeting has changed public spending priorities, reducing inequalities in places. The improvement of the quality of life in some of the municipalities has been evident, as it is the first time that the local government has taken into account the needs of the poorest sectors of the population. Participatory budgeting has not only meant a much greater involvement of citizens and community organisations in determining priorities but also a more transparent and accountable form of government.

However, decentralisation does not always equate with increased democratic participation. It does not necessarily break power structures or lead to a redistribution of resources, but may only result in de-concentration with a transfer of power to another level of the bureaucracy.

Widespread citizen participation and use of DIPs in policy processes and in the design of technologies and services does not mean that government bureaucracies and other organisations (private, NGOs...) have no role. Health professionals, engineers, architects, urban planners, scientists all have specialist knowledge that can usefully feed into citizen deliberations and more inclusive forms of

participation. But the deliberative process and the political negotiation over what constitutes valid knowledge in a particular context (see Box 2), deeply challenge bureaucracies and professionals to assume different roles and responsibilities. In particular, existing bureaucracies and professionals will often need to shift from being project implementers and deliverers of standard services and technologies to new roles that facilitate local people's analysis, deliberations, planning, action, monitoring and evaluation. The whole process should strengthen local groups and institutions, so enhancing the capacity of citizens to take action on their own. This implies changes in organisational cultures and the adoption of new professional skills and values.

Box 2 Knowledge and power

"Contests for knowledge are contests for power. For nearly two centuries that contest has been rigged in favour of scientific knowledge by the established power structures. We should ask why scientific knowledge has acquired the privileged status that it enjoys, why it is that scientists' endeavours are not seen to be on a par with other cultural endeavours, but have come to be singled out as providing the one and only expert route to knowledge and guide to action. We need to confront the question of what kinds of knowledge we want to produce, and recognise that that is at the same time a question about what kinds of power relations we want to support – and what kind of world we want to live in... A socially responsible science has to be a science that does not allow itself to be set apart from, let alone above, other human endeavours. In our interactions with the world, we are all involved in the production of knowledge about the world – in that sense, there is no single group of experts" (Kamminga, 1995).

However, the adoption of a participatory culture within organisations and changes in professional attitudes and behaviour are unlikely to automatically follow when new methods are adopted or suddenly become fashionable 'out there'. Many scientists and professionals will need to learn new communication and facilitation skills to usefully engage in citizen juries, scenario workshops and other DIPs. But training of agency personnel in participatory principles, concepts and methods must be viewed as part of a larger process of reorienting institutional policies, organisational cultures, procedures, financial management practices, reporting systems, supervisory methods, reward systems and norms (IIED-IDS, 2000). In both government departments and other organisations, the challenge for top and middle management is to design appropriate institutional mechanisms and rewards to encourage the spread of DIPs and other participatory methods within the organisation (see Box 3). Without this support from the top, it is unlikely that deliberative and participatory approaches that enhance citizen capacities and innovation will become core professional activities.

Box 3 Transforming organisations for deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment

Key actions for reformers working for more accountable organisations (local and national government, NGOs, private sector) include the following.

- Diversify the governance and the membership of budget allocation committees of public sector planning, services and research institutes to include representatives of diverse citizen groups. Establish procedures to ensure transparency, equity and accountability in the allocation of funds and dissemination of new knowledge
- Encourage shifts from hierarchical and rigidly bureaucratic structures to 'flat', flexible and responsive organisations
- Provide capacity building for technical and scientific personnel to foster those participatory skills, attitudes and behaviour needed to learn from citizens (mutual listening, respect, gender sensitivity as well as methods for participatory learning and action)
- Ensure that senior and middle management positions are occupied by competent facilitators of organisational change, with the vision, commitment and ability to reverse gender and other discriminatory biases in the ideologies, disciplines and practices animating an organisation
- Promote and reward management that is consultative and participatory rather than verticalist and efficiency led. Establish incentive and accountability systems that are equitable for women and men
- Provide incentives and high rewards for staff to experiment, take initiatives and acknowledge errors as a way of learning by doing and engaging with the diverse local realities of citizen's livelihoods in urban and rural contexts
- Redesign practical arrangements, the use of space and time within the workplace to meet the diverse needs of women, men and older staff as well as their new professional obligations to work more closely with citizens and other actors (time tables, career paths, working hours, provision of paternity and maternity leave, childcare provisions, mini sabbaticals, promotion criteria...)
- Encourage and reward the use of gender disaggregated and socially differentiated local indicators and criteria in monitoring and evaluation as well as in guiding subsequent technical support, policy changes and allocation of scarce resources.

A reality check: where is power concentrated today?

Enabling government policies, organisational change and professional reorientation are all necessary preconditions for the widespread use of DIPs in the social construction of reality *by* and *for* citizens. However, at this time in history the 'power to define reality' rests less and less with governments and professionals engaged in planning, service delivery and in the design of technologies to meet human needs for food, health, shelter, energy and culture. Globalisation in its present form induces huge power differentials as a small minority of economic actors seek more control over markets, technologies, policies and institutions, imposing a one-dimensional homogenising reality on diversity. Of the top one hundred economic entities of the world, 51 are corporations and only 49 are states. The top 200 transnational corporations (TNCs) are

responsible for about 25% of all measured economic activity in the world. Since the early 1990s, in the United States, average corporate profits have increased by 108% and the compensation packages of Corporate Chief Executives have increased by a massive 481%. During the same period, average annual wages for workers have risen only 28%, barely keeping abreast with inflation. In 1960 the combined incomes of the richest fifth of the world's population were 30 times greater than the poorest fifth. By 1991 it was over 60 times and in 1998 the UN's latest figures estimate it as 78 times as high.

Powerful TNCs use a variety of official and unofficial instruments to impose three basic freedoms central to the neo-liberal credo of international competitiveness and comparative advantage: freedom of investment, freedom of capital flows, freedom of trade in goods and services (George, 2000).

TNCs rely on unofficial, non-transparent and discrete bodies to influence governments and opinion makers like.

- The European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) made up of the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of 47 of the largest European TNCs. The ERT works closely with the European Commission and individual heads of states, often writing some of the Commission's most important 'White Papers' (Europe Ink, 2000)
- The TransAtlantic Business Dialogue (TABD) composed of CEOs from North America and Europe. Through regular dialogues with top politicians and international agency leaders, the TABD strongly influences international trade negotiations. It also maintains permanent expert committees on a range of topics including standard-setting for goods and services so that products may be freely sold in all markets.

As an official organisation, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is particularly responsive to the demands of TNCs for internationally binding rules in favour of total freedom of trade in goods and services. With little or no public oversight, corporations actively shape WTO negotiations on the liberalisation of trade on goods, agricultural products and intellectual property. Areas such as health, education, culture, the environment, and energy are also corporate targets under the emerging General Agreement on Trade in Services. The decisions of the WTO's 'Dispute Resolution Mechanism' (panels of trade experts, meeting behind closed doors) are enforceable through sanctions and apply to all 136 member-countries, both developed and developing. This is where WTO's greatest power lies: during the first four years of its existence, the rulings of the dispute settlement body have generally upheld corporate interests over those of people and the environment.

Corporate led globalisation is increasingly disempowering many more citizens on an unprecedented scale, both in the North and the South. Increasing job losses, fractured livelihoods, economic marginalisation, fear and anxiety about the future are all induced by the drive for comparative advantage and international competitiveness *via*:

- Relocations of industry and services, often from countries with higher labour costs and regulatory standards (environmental, working conditions) to countries with lower ones
- Mergers and acquisitions, with post acquisition rationalisation
- Deployment of new cost and labour saving technologies (computers, robotics, automation, biotechnologies) in the restructuring of manufacturing, agriculture and, increasingly, service sectors such as banking, insurance, airlines, accounting, retailing and hotels
- Reductions in public sector spending and privatisation
- Spread of a culture and vision emphasising the inevitability of the neo-liberal agenda, the public has to accept that There Is No Alternative (TINA syndrome)

Transformation for deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment

Whilst clearly important and necessary, it is not enough to merely view the institutionalisation of DIPs and participation as an expansion of *political* democracy to include more people and places in shaping the policy process, technologies and institutions. An analysis of how power is increasingly exercised and mediated today suggests that the issue of *economic* democracy is fundamental for change. Widening *economic* democracy is now a key overarching condition for the mainstreaming of participation and DIPs in *this* globalising world.

In practice, leveling the economic playing field for participation calls for *mutually reinforcing* and radical structural reforms. Among these the following merit closer attention.

- A guaranteed and unconditional minimum citizen income for all. A Citizen Income is based on the notion that the productive capacity of society is the result of all the scientific and technical knowledge accumulated by previous generations. This is a common heritage of humankind and all individuals regardless of origin, age or sex have a right to benefit from it, in the form of an unconditional basic income. An equitable distribution of the existing world product would allow each person on earth to benefit from such a basic income. Apart from offering a measure of security, a Citizen income would allow people to find more time to engage in civic affairs and deliberative processes.

- A reduction of time spent in wage-work and more equitable sharing of jobs. This is about finding ways to a) ensure that wage-work is more evenly distributed so that everyone can invest in other activities, *outside the wage economy*; b) defend the rights associated with wage-work; c) change the sexual division of labour so that men do as much unpaid work as women; and, d) move towards a post-wage society and introducing new rights delinked from wage-work. An important goal here is to free up peoples' time for self chosen and autonomous activities, whilst ensuring freedom from economic necessity.
- The re-localisation of plural economies that combine both subsistence and market oriented activities. Several mutually reinforcing enabling policies have been identified to bring about such transformation for diversity, decentralisation and democracy (see Box 4). The environments where people live will need to offer more individual and collective opportunities to engage in many different activities outside, and unmediated by, the market, wage work and commodity production. Moreover, these environments must be designed to provide the structural means by which citizens can manage their own affairs through face to face processes of deliberation and decision making.

Box 4 Policy reversals for diversity and localisation

- Reorientation of the end goals of aid and trade rules such that they contribute to the building of local economies and local control, rather than international competitiveness
- Reintroduction of protective safeguards for domestic economies, including safeguards against imports of goods and services that can be produced locally
- A site-here-to-sell-here policy for manufacturing and services domestically and regionally
- Localising money such that the majority stays within its place of origin and helps rebuild the economies of communities
- Local competition policy to eliminate monopolies from the more protected economies and ensure high quality goods and services
- Fund the transition to more localised economies and environmental regeneration by introducing taxes on resources and on speculative international financial flows (US 1500 billion dollars is traded every day on foreign exchange markets alone. Most of it is purely speculative and has nothing to do with the real economy)

Sources: Hines, 2000; ATTAC, 2000

Conclusion

Perhaps more than ever before, the growth of democratic participation in the North and the South depends on expanding spaces for autonomous action by civil society as well as on a process of localisation and reversals that regenerates diverse local economies, technologies and ecologies. The unprecedented imbalances of power induced by corporate-led globalisation challenge us to engage with these conceptual and methodological frontiers. Now is a time for bold and extraordinary initiatives to ensure that participation does not become a forgotten human right in this century.

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