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Participatory processes for policy change: reflections on the *Prajateerpu* e-forum

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Lessons from the e-forum

This final article is an attempt to provide an overview of the commentaries received during the e-forum on Participatory Processes for Policy Change, which we moderated for IIED and IDS in August and September 2002. It is by no means exhaustive, and we therefore recommend that people read the full set of contributions that have been reproduced in this special issue of *PLA Notes*. These are very rich in insights and reflections and serve to advance the debate in a number of important ways. This was certainly our hope for the e-forum when it was set up.

Issues of evidence

There is much talk today of 'evidence-based' policy research. But what does this mean? What evidence, and whose evidence counts? The *Prajateerpu* exercise raised important questions about this issue. Some commentators were firmly wedded to a conventional positivist view of knowledge and truth, using words like validity, rigour, and independence (including the directors of our respective institutes, see Bezanon/Cross). The majority of commentators, however, took a more reflective view of issues of knowledge in policy making, arguing that all knowledge is necessarily situated and constructed, and that no simple truth can come out of, especially, highly contested, complex, and uncertain deliberations

about future scenarios. This complexity presents, as Sagasti points out, particular challenges for the design of such exercises where the empirical base for statements about the future necessarily remains conjectural.

Drawing on a long tradition of participatory action research, Gaventa makes a case for an alternative set of criteria for evaluating participatory events of this sort, stating that those immersed in the positivist paradigm are 'missing the point'. He argues against the 'mythology of neutrality' and calls for a redirecting of the discussion away from a concern with idealist questions about truth and validity claims and towards a concern for pluralistic dialogue, pragmatic outcomes, and a reflexive sense of what is important.¹

¹ Guest editors' note: Gaventa is presenting what may be described as a 'phenomenological critique of positivism', which refutes the principle of verification. The phenomenological approach to science is to relax the verification principle, but still rule out metaphysical justification (phenomenology retains the requirement of empirical falsification of statements about reality). This approach entails a big concession (i.e., that truth cannot be verified) and therefore requires the establishment of some criteria for deciding what constitutes a meaningful statement. The phenomenological approach to evaluating science is to rely on the consensus (or 'intersubjective') opinion of the community of scholars regarding the 'acceptability' – or trustworthiness – of statements about reality. What is theory? What is science? What is good science? According to the phenomenological position, the answers to these questions rest with the community of scholars and in the case of participatory processes, the community of practitioners. It is this community that decides if a set of statements qualifies as a theory. It is this community that decides when work meets the criteria of science and qualifies as 'good science'. And it is this community that decides not the truthfulness of statements, but their acceptance as the best statements possible until something better comes along.

Who are 'the poor'?
And are their 'voices'
really being heard?



To interrogate issues from all sides, Stirling, for example, argues for an approach that emphasises 'opening up' – to conflict, contention, dissent, and dispute – in the true spirit of deliberation. The potential of a challenging 'devil's advocate' approach is suggested by Wynne, to help probe often tacit, culturally embedded assumptions. Such an approach contrasts with ones which potentially 'close down' debate. As Pretty et al. comment, citizen juries, with their reliance on a 'drive to consensus', 'agenda control', 'rationalist discourse', and 'expert' testimony, potentially can fall into this trap, just like conventional research methods.

A number of commentators expressed their disappointment that the *Prajateerpu* exercise (or at least the report) did not seem to capture the range of dispute, debate, and nuances of deliberation among the participants. As Stirling points out, the exercise was very much in the position of 'partisan lobbying' rather than open deliberation. Others remarked that the sometimes-loaded commentary and editorialising of the authors – particularly at the end of the report – added another layer of interpretation – or 'spin' – to the commentaries of the participants. 'Presentation', as Chambers points out, 'affects impact'. The rigour of participatory research is based, as he notes, on self-critical reflection that 'entails striving to be critically aware of ourselves, [our] interests and predispositions'. Interpretive work, as Wynne observes, is part of a 'continuing process of publication, alternative attempted representations and interpretations, criticism, and development of positions, including self-understanding'.

Wynne goes on to note the importance of 'interpretive responsibility' of convenors of participatory events. There are inevitably issues of translation and interpretation involved in the presentation of any set of 'data', be they the results of a quantitative sample survey or the discussions of

participants in a citizens' jury. Do those who are intermediaries – increasingly a key role – act on behalf of marginalised people, interpreting their comments in ways that they think are for their own good (the activist, organic intellectual) or do they report simply what is said and maintain a stance of independence and neutrality (in the classic tradition of supposedly impartial research)?

As Colbourne points out, issues of credibility come to the fore, particularly when contentious results emerge. How can the independence of the process be guaranteed? How can the facilitators and authors avoid accusations of partiality and manipulation of results? As these sort of exercises become more and more used – by governments, by aid donors, by NGOs, by farmers' organisations, unions, and others – to complement other routes to policy influence, it will be important to address these issues head on lest the opportunities for more deliberative and inclusive engagement are discredited by those who perhaps don't like what they are hearing. 'Legitimacy and authority' are, as Gujja notes, related to access to power and resources, and those who don't agree can often override the deliberations of those without such access.

An underlying theme of the many of the contributions has been the related question of the politics of methodology. As Gaventa observes, 'Concerns with methodology have historically been used by those in power to discredit those who challenge a dominant discourse'. Many commentators agreed that this was certainly evident in the controversy over *Prajateerpu*. With a focus of the debate on issues of 'quality' defined in narrow, positivist terms, those who objected to the results were able to reframe the discussion and divert attention from more pertinent issues.² The contributors to this e-forum have, by and large, rejected this stance, arguing for a more plural, open, and less censorial approach, with a wider view about acceptable criteria for evaluating 'evidence' and assessing results.

Many contributors have emphasised the importance of plural perspectives, open debate, and diversity of views. This is the essence of a deliberative ideal, where all views can be aired and new ones developed. Such deliberations, almost

² Guest editors' note: 'positivist' philosophy attempts to establish a set of rules for science that can verify the truthfulness of statements about reality. Positivist scientists view the scientific method as universal and equally applicable to all areas of inquiry. Positivists within the discipline of policy science attempt to apply the procedures of the natural sciences to fit research that falls into the realm of social science. Moreover, traditional policy researchers would also have us believe that policy research is objective and unbiased, and able to produce universal laws. However, many social scientists dispute these claims to objectivity and argue that, inasmuch as policy science and policy research deals with human conduct and reactionary behaviour, it is neither a true positivist science nor an objective one.

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by their very nature, rarely result in neat consensus, let alone a jury style verdict. Thus, many argue for more open-ended outcomes than allowed for in the *Prajateerpu* exercise. Wynne notes, for instance, that the yes/no formulation leaves a 'gaping hole' which actually should be at the centre of public discourse and policy debate, but may go unaddressed by an unnecessary polarisation of views and positions.

Issues of representation

Everyone it seems these days needs 'the poor' to speak in support of their policy positions in order to gain legitimacy and credibility. Examples abound, from the World Bank eliciting the 'voices of the poor' in support of their new poverty policies, to Monsanto with their 'demonstration' farmers speaking for the benefits of biotechnology, to NGOs and activists speaking on behalf of poor people's needs. In the current policy environment, where participation is all, poor people become important actors in the policy process, either as disembodied voices in the sound-bite quote approach of the World Bank or as real people standing up passionately at public meetings. But who are 'the poor'? And are their 'voices' really being heard? Such questions often remain unanswered, and for this reason issues of representation become key. Such issues, as pointed out in the e-forum, are simultaneously intellectual, methodological, and political.

Much commentary in the e-forum dwelt on the representativeness of the jurors and the scenarios used as a focus for the deliberations. But representativeness is a contested and loaded term, as many of the contributions both implicitly and explicitly acknowledge. As Stirling observes, 'Any one concept of "representation" or "independence" will embody only one subset of possible relevant factors [and]

be open to equally valid (but discordant) observations'.

Several contributors (Glover, Deshingkar, and Johnson) make the point that the *Prajateerpu* 'citizens' jury' was not strictly a jury. The jurors were not selected randomly, but purposively. They were not intended to 'represent' society at large, but a particular marginalised group, with a particular set of interests and livelihood constraints. With the strange exception of one juror added on to 'represent' urban consumer interests (a slightly incongruous slip by the organisers into a standard approach), the jurors were made up of poor people, mostly women, reliant predominantly on a farming livelihood and largely from a *Dalit* caste background. Having 'explicit biases towards the poor' is, as Gaventa, Suryanarayanan, Gujja, and others point out, a perfectly justifiable strategy and one wholly consonant with an activist, policy-influencing stance. Bezanson and Cross argue that, while such purposeful selection of jurors is entirely legitimate – and even necessary – to seek out the voices of those who are opposed to the modernisation of traditional agriculture, 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. Perhaps a better description of the exercise, then, was not a 'jury' but a 'panel', dropping the problematic legal association of trials, juries, and verdicts. But semantics aside, there remain important questions about participant selection. For example, Sagasti remarks that the approach taken in Andhra Pradesh appears to have been clear and transparent, according to a series of well laid out criteria. His only objection was potentially to the question of bias and 'group think' introduced through participants association with particular groups and NGOs. Perhaps this is an inevitable trade-off between involving representatives of marginalised groups without the networks and connections to carry the results of the process beyond the event, and having people who, although from the poorest communities and in many ways disenfranchised, do have the opportunity to engage with follow up activities and interact with policy processes at least at local levels (see below on issues engagement).

Richards raises a related question about the representativeness of 'participatory' meetings in general. This, in his view, is the 'Achilles' heel' of participatory approaches. To avoid biases entering into the participant selection process towards 'those who do the discourse' (including representatives of poor groups), he suggests the need for detailed, baseline, social science research prior to the participatory exercise. In the *Prajateerpu* instance, this was not done, nor was the very substantial body of existing work on livelihood

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and technology issues in rural Andhra Pradesh drawn upon to any great extent. Whether it is conceivable that such in-depth social research could be undertaken in advance of all deliberative and participatory procedures requires a wider discussion.

Much e-forum commentary also dwelt on the issue of the 'representativeness' of the scenarios used to inform the jury's deliberations in the *Prajateerpu* process. Some viewed these as biased, creating a 'self-fulfilling prophesy', whereby only one could have been chosen (Bezanson and Cross). As Sagasti points out, conventionally scenario options should be 'equally appealing', but quite how this could be so in this instance given the socio-economic position of the jurors is unclear.

Furthermore, as Brown suggests, there seems to be an implicit assumption that if the jury had been fully representative and the process perfectly designed, the results would be 'scientifically true' and less subject to challenge. He argues that the jury verdicts 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'.

These exchanges seem to raise two other pertinent issues. First, as Deshingkar and Johnson observe, the range of scenarios presented to the farmer-jurists in the *Prajateerpu* exercise may have limited the debate. They call attention to significant research on livelihoods in AP (incidentally, DFID funded) that highlights a greater complexity of livelihood pathways than were captured in the three scenarios used in *Prajateerpu*. A scenario based on this work, they imply, might have complemented the others, and provided more fodder for debate and discussion. Second, as already noted, the 'verdict' requirement of the jury format led to a situation where deliberation around and

across scenarios was, it appears, not part of the process, potentially leaving an array of important issues untouched. Perhaps a more interesting route would have been to focus on the trade-offs between scenarios, exploring the 'gaping hole' between polarised positions (Wynne), and avoid the perhaps artificial 'closing down' to an agreed verdict.

Issues of engagement

A deliberative event of this sort is necessarily only one part of a longer process of policy engagement and debate. Critiques of the *Vision 2020* approach adopted in AP certainly did not start with *Prajateerpu*, nor will they end with it. But in order to develop an alternative vision for a sustainable rural future, much more work has to be done beyond a simple rejection of the dominant *Vision 2020* view. This is of course an important step, and the presentation of the jury results to the media was most definitely focused on this aspect of the jury outcome. As Wynne notes, the jury result was uncontroversially a resounding 'no' to the *Vision 2020* approach, but also, and importantly, not a 'no' to all aspects of it under all circumstances. As he observes, 'To see alternative scientific opportunities requires commitment, imagination, and reflection by scientific and technical experts helped by public voices'.

On the basis of their extended research in AP, Deshingkar and Johnson point out that poor people are not automatically 'anti' new technology per se, but want to know about the wider deal (debt burdens, hidden costs, impact on labour, and so on) (a point reinforced further by Reddy Peddireddy in the 'Issues of accountability' section). In other words, many may be 'pro' certain types of biotechnology, for instance, under certain conditions, and vehemently 'anti' other types of technology option under different conditions. New technology and development options therefore must fit into and build on existing livelihood strategies if they are to work. While rejecting (as many in AP and beyond do) the modernist vision of *Vision 2020*, the real work has to be in creating – and promoting – alternatives suited to real people's livelihoods and aspirations, not those based on the models of international management consultants or northern green NGOs. Poor people in AP urgently 'need new options', as Deshingkar and Johnson argue. The innovative participatory scenario approach experimented with here clearly has some important potentials, but these, as all contributors agree, deserve further exploration and elaboration.

A key challenge for deliberative processes is to assist in reframing debates. With much policy discourse constrained by the framing assumptions and political commitments of

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those in power, the opportunity for others to interrogate assumptions and recast the debate is important. There is a danger of slipping back into simple polarisations, however, as in much of the GM debate, which, as Wynne puts it, 'constrain the exploration of alternatives grounded in more democratic inputs'. As Stirling notes, 'the manner of engagement with policy debate is very different in "opening up" mode. The purpose becomes one of informing and stimulating more active plural discourse rather than prescribing and justifying particular options for closure'.

Wynne goes on to comment that one challenge laid down by the *Prajateerpu* exercise was 'escaping the hegemony of (singular) modernisation'. According to Pinotti, the deliberations went beyond the 'norms of efficiency and progress' to an alternative vision based on the 'politics of autonomy', where other perspectives, often personal and intuitive, have a say. This opening up of debate presents a critical challenge to forms of engagement in policy processes. This must apply to specific policies just as much as it does to broader strategies and ideas in the policy domain (such as *Vision 2020*). As Wynne argues 'not policy' is often in fact policy, but withdrawn from critical public scrutiny.

Beyond the deliberations, then, processes of influencing policy outcomes are a critical complement to any deliberative forum or event. How do we locate citizen juries/panels/scenario workshops in broader policy processes? In the commentaries, different alternatives are both implicitly and explicitly discussed. Three alternatives suggest themselves:

- one-off, high profile events, aimed at raising and refocusing the debate, linked to an activist approach of media campaigning and lobbying activity, with messages necessarily stylised and focused to gain attention (the advocacy ideal);

- attempts at ongoing deliberation, recognising complexity, dispute, dissent, and multiple perspectives, with the aim of gaining credibility and purchase on those in power through inclusive processes of argumentation (the deliberative ideal, cf. Stirling, Pretty et al., Colborne, Pinotti); and,
- stimulating local organisations and democratic processes, where policy debates are emergent from strengthened capacities to deliberate and influence from the bottom up (the local democratic ideal, cf. Gujja, Suryanarayanan).

Of course these options are not mutually exclusive, and one may feed into the other. In the *Prajateerpu* exercise the deliberative ideal was an important starting point, although a more activist stance was initiated in the post jury publicity and report writing phase. The hope of the organisers has also been that the process will become a trigger for greater embeddedness in local organisations' own advocacy activities, reinforcing a local democratic ideal. Without careful thought, however, tensions may exist between these ideals, resulting in conflicting strategies and tactics. Thus a fully partisan publicity-oriented campaign, based on the advocacy ideal, may undermine trust in the deliberative process it is based on, particularly by those who remain sceptical of the results. With advocacy work – and particularly international media campaigning – the key actors are often removed from local settings, potentially creating distance between local actors and well-connected activists. Some of these tensions inevitably arose during the *Prajateerpu* process and, as Colborne observes, probably deserve further reflection and debate.

Reason notes that citizen juries, as time delimited events, may be criticised out of context if attention is not paid to the wider articulation with 'an emerging process of democratic debate'. Such a focus recasts the discussion beyond narrow issues of evidence and representation to questions of how to facilitate processes of democratic

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engagement, with citizen juries being one part of a bigger picture. This is an important point, and suggests many questions about the role of participatory 'events' within wider democratic processes. What, for instance, should the relationship be between citizen juries and representative electoral politics (cf. Goetz)? How should deliberative spaces created outside state sanctioned structures and processes articulate with the more formal channels of policymaking (cf. Sagasti)? How does this affect our understanding of the role of the state and of citizens in policymaking (cf. Gujja)? And what potentials exist for a more emergent process of democratic engagement in settings such as AP (cf. Reason, Gujja, Suryanaryana, and others)? These questions remain unanswered by the *Prajateerpu* experience, but in our view urgently require further discussion.

Whatever strategies are employed there remains a critical role for intermediaries, convenors, and facilitators. What role should they play? Wynne argues, for example, that independent (but inevitably positioned) researchers (operating in what the authors of the *Prajateerpu* report term 'take only' mode) can play a useful role in exposing complexity, hidden exploitation and the perverse unintended effects of policies. Colborne believes that such researchers/facilitators must tread a careful line between raising controversial issues, while maintaining independence and credibility in the eyes of critics and sceptics. The role of accreditation was raised (cf. Newell) and the importance of a demonstrably independent oversight panel was highlighted. Others argue that the activist researcher necessarily must take a stand and be seen to do so, using all political means at their disposal to push the debate forward (cf. Pinotti, Wynne). Here difficult interactions with the media, forms of publicity, and campaigning come to the fore, and questions can be raised as to whether this should be the role of the jury facilitators or other stakeholders in the process.

The opening up of debate presents a critical challenge to forms of engagement in policy processes



Issues of accountability

To what extent do deliberative processes, such as *Prajateerpu*, offer opportunities for holding the powerful to account? This was certainly one of the stated objectives of the process – introducing alternative perspectives and voices into a debate about rural futures where marginalised farmers had previously been excluded. The specific aim was to hold the AP government and its aid donors to account, allowing the questioning of motives and strategies by those who are supposed to be 'beneficiaries' of the development enterprise. Follow up meetings with AP and UK government officials were clearly designed towards this end. The commentary contributed by UK Department for International Development (DFID) India to the e-forum reveals that the whole affair has encouraged further reflection within the organisation on its approach to food, agriculture, and rural development in AP, indicating some success in this regard. But are exercises like *Prajateerpu* the model towards improving accountability – through complex, necessarily expensive, high profile events? Or are there other routes – through more informal lobbying and influencing or through the normal channels of representative democracy (however limiting in the AP setting, as Gujja notes)? For example, is there a potential that participatory events, outside the normal orbit of decision making and politics, may sometimes undermine the growth, strength, and efficacy of other forms of policy dialogue?

Goetz asks whether citizen juries or other deliberative procedures have a right to demand information, call witnesses or offer information to the legislature? Do they, in other words, have the clout to realise true accountability? She argues that, in practice, 'consultations' have become popular among the development establishment because of their 'aura of authenticity that they impart to

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public decision making.' Presented as 'proof' that 'ordinary people' have articulated their concerns they are offered up as accountability mechanisms. But she goes on to note that such events may offer voice without accountability, and that this can only result in disenchantment. Chambers, by contrast, takes a more optimistic view. He argues that citizen juries and similar exercises can present real opportunities for self-critical reflection by those in power, offering opportunities to learn and do better.

Much of the discussion surrounding the *Prajateerpu* results has been focused on DFID and the UK Government rather than the AP Government per se. As a major aid donor in the state, this is clearly appropriate, but the new way in which aid is provided (essentially untied budget support granted on the basis of some general conditionalities about 'pro-poor policy' and 'good governance') makes direct forms of accountability (to projects or particular items of expenditure) more difficult. Inadvertently the *Prajateerpu* exercise has raised some important questions about the accountability of aid donors in the era of direct budgetary support. Is it sufficient for foreign donors to pass the buck, saying that support is granted to an elected government and the government is responsible to their electorate for how things get spent and delivered? Those involved in the *Prajateerpu* exercise clearly think not. But this is a debate that, though not explored in depth in the e-forum, will certainly be raised again.

Conclusions

As Bezanson and Cross note, citizens' juries and associated deliberative and inclusionary processes are important new areas of methodological experimentation, at the forefront of challenges for development policy making everywhere. Despite differences of opinion and emphasis on certain aspects, the e-forum has shown that there is much more common ground than would first appear. The methodological insights offered by contributors to this electronic forum have demonstrated how the practical, the political, and the processual are all intertwined, and that simple responses based on narrow framings or limited methodological viewpoints are insufficient. As Pretty et al. comment, 'Juries should be conceived of as part of a potentially open and open-ended political process, where they contribute to a broader debate'.

The *Prajateerpu* exercise and its aftermath have certainly generated a great deal of heat over the past year. As Colbourne wryly observes, 'Who would have thought that hearing people's views could be so powerful?'. But the intense debate ignited by *Prajateerpu* also illuminated a number of significant issues about people-centred approaches for informing and influencing policy, processes, and practice from below. Several of these issues were highlighted in the many constructive offerings made to this e-forum, but few were resolved and most will require further elucidation and deliberation. In future, this ongoing debate will occur in a range of fora and among a variety of networks. This e-forum is simply one contribution to that broader set of exchanges and we encourage others to create other open spaces to allow critical reflection and discussion on these and other related topics.

In concluding, we would like to thank all those who registered and contributed to this exchange of views, as well as the many interested observers who visited the website to read the exchanges. As Chambers reflects, 'The costs of the *Prajateerpu* process have been high'. We hope that, with the addition of the many considered and perceptive reflections that were contributed to the e-forum, it will have been worth the price.

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