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Towards empowered participation: stories and reflections

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Introduction

This special issue is essentially a series of stories about participation. All are premised on the belief that participation should create opportunities for people's broader engagement in the processes of knowledge generation and policy-making. A second linked theme is that, rather than empower people in this way, much of what is claimed to be public engagement, involvement or 'giving people a voice' merely reinforces existing knowledge-validating and decision-making structures.

In the seven years since one of us jointly edited *Deliberative democracy and citizen empowerment* (*PLA Notes* 40, 2001), three trends have transformed the participation landscape in which we operate.[1]

• The rhetoric of participation has become a mainstay of policy documents and political speeches from the United Nations to local councils. In the UK at least, invitations to 'have your say' – via text message, email or telephone – are everyday occurrences on radio, TV and in popular newspapers and magazines.

• An *ad hoc* alliance of market research corporations, foundations and other organisations with influence on govern-

Front cover illustration, *PLA Notes* 40.

Cartoon: Regina Doyle

ment have presented themselves as cutting-edge practitioners and promoters of best practice in participation. They have worked with policy makers to develop and validate schemes that promise a voice to citizens, yet which largely ignore the rich traditions of social justice movements on their own doorstep.[2]

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[1] See www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/pla_backissues/40.html Guest edited by Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford.

[2] A recent example is Involve & National Consumer Council, 2008 *Deliberative public engagement: nine principles*. Involve, London. See www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

"…if participation continues to be ignored, suppressed or domesticated, we will not only fail to live up to the promise of participation, but will risk sacrificing some of the democratic gains made by our predecessors."

- There has been a subtle change in how policy makers view citizens. On the one hand, citizen involvement programmes promise a shift from envisaging people as semi-passive 'users and choosers' to seeing them as 'makers and shapers'. Yet, the same authorities may withdraw funding from groups with particular identities – such as visible minorities experiencing oppression.[3]

The resulting participatory programmes usually fail to achieve their stated goal of engagement with citizens and could even lead to a participatory citizenship programme that undermines grassroots attempts to challenge the *status quo*.

Empowered participation, suppression or domestication?

Overall we see the failures of participation as stemming from a combination of structural issues within powerful organisations, together with the misuse of participation techniques in order to advance particular agendas.

The hierarchical structure and pre-defined missions of many government departments, associated delivery agencies and private corporations are antithetical to successful participation. To avoid disrupting 'business as usual', such organisations may therefore adopt one of two broad strategies when dealing with participation processes:

- To facilitate a genuine process and then to devise a means of ignoring or suppressing those of its outcomes that do not suit its agenda (see Shorts 8a).
- To engage in a range of manipulations of the process that ensures that the outcome suits those purposes (see Shorts 8b). We call these practices 'domestication', in so far as they restrict the ability of participants to speak and think for themselves.

[3] An example from the UK was the threat by Ealing local council to withdraw funding from the Southall Black Sisters, perhaps the UK's best known group working on domestic violence and other issues affecting women from black and minority ethnic groups in Britain. The council said it did not want to privilege the ethnic minorities in the local area over the majority white population. In doing so it ignored the well documented particular dangers young black women face in their homes and in the local community. These issues were vividly portrayed in the 2007 film *Provoked*, based on a book of the same name by Kiranjit Ahluwalia and Rahila Gupta.

We contrast domesticated participation with what some analysts are calling empowered participation (Fung, 2006). Last year we asked a range of participation practitioners and analysts to contribute to this issue of *PLA* based on the following logic: if participation continues to be ignored, suppressed or domesticated, we will not only fail to live up to the promise of participation, but will risk sacrificing some of the democratic gains made by our predecessors.

All our contributors have written about their practice in the belief that only by looking at the barriers to empowered participation, with an honest and self-evaluative approach, will practitioners be able to formulate strategies that stand a chance of making an impact on the scale necessary to address our various global crises.

About the articles in this issue

Each contributor to this special issue highlights factors that have threatened the potential for genuine participation in particular contexts. Obstacles may be political – as was the case with *Prajateerpu* (Kuruganti and colleagues, article 2). In other cases, organisers may not even be aware that already oppressed groups, such as women or disabled people, have been further marginalised by the way the participatory process was organised or analysed (Kanji and Tan, article 12).

The way that scientific or medical expertise is deployed in participatory processes is also explored in several papers, focusing on the issues of HIV/AIDS (ICW, article 11), climate change (Eady and colleagues, article 6), nanotechnology (Singh, article 4), and GM crops (Shorts 8c; Bryant, article 3).

Contributors point to the disappointment in what appear to be token exercises in public engagement. Citizens' juries or panels can easily become 'a new toy for academics, policy makers and other professional elites,' as Fitzduff and colleagues stress, when institutions or governments have no real interest in acting upon their recommendations (article 7).

One citizens' jury in the UK (Kashefi and Keene, article 5) proved influential partly because it was well-supported before it began, but also because its conclusions meshed with established government health targets. By contrast, attempts to replicate Brazil's model of participatory budgeting in the UK (Blakey, article 10) have foundered, as prevailing government financial targets pre-empted grassroots decision-making. There are also suggestions (Chavez, article 9) that the Latin American model on which the UK processes have been based is more problematic than has been acknowledged so far. The Mali farmers' jury, l'ECID (Bryant, article 3), stands out as a rare success story, and owes much to both a methodology devised together with members of a successful political

movement, and, to the status and political activism of the farmer jurors.

Two papers (Clay, article 14 and Haq, article 15) contrast the achievements of sustained, grassroots community activism in Britain in the 1970s and 80s with today's promotion of citizens' juries or government agency-led 'community consultation'. In Andhra Pradesh (Madhusudhan, article 16), an indigenous people's organisation called *Girijan Deepika* has revived informal meetings, *Gotti*, to revitalise community control over food and farming, in a far-reaching campaign to reclaim indigenous knowledge, culture and livelihoods under threat from development programmes. In this context, participatory decision-making and community activism have come together to empower a whole community.

Two articles and four short papers focus on attempts to engage large institutions in participation. The first (Pearce, Pearson and Cameron, article 13) looks at efforts of UK universities, and one in particular, to engage in participatory processes with local residents. In the **In Touch** section, a recent book by Celia Davis and colleagues is reviewed. Its authors explore a deliberative process that was commissioned by a UK health agency that was intended to democratise decision-making in the huge state-run UK health system. In a section called Shorts (article 8), four brief contributions give glimpses of the interface between people and attempts by large organisations to domesticate their participation in four different contexts:

- an ethnically diverse community governed by an unreceptive town council in northern England (Shorts 8a);
- a group of randomly chosen UK residents, some of whom felt duped by a UK government consultation on nuclear power (Shorts 8b);
- a citizens' jury on GM crops where the question asked of the jury by a government agency prejudiced its impact on the policy process (Shorts 8c); and finally,
- the transcript of a youtube.com film made by people with experience of being the 'citizens' in participatory processes when a major UK charity asked them to give their views at a conference (Shorts 8d).

Many people, particularly policy makers or organisations commissioning participatory projects, may read *PLA* in the hope of finding a blueprint that will guarantee the effectiveness of such processes in every context. But we believe this expectation would be misguided. We do, however, believe it is possible to find principles of good practice.[4] Three themes run through this

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[4] There has recently been a suggestion that the International Standards Organisation (ISO) could incorporate good practice in participation in a voluntary guidance standard for social responsibility, ISO 26000.

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issue that are particularly relevant for practitioners:
- the need for counter-balances;
- long time horizons; and
- reflective practice.

The need for counter-balances
The examples of participatory practice in this special issue that have fostered empowerment, rather than suppression or domestication, have been those which have included what Archon Fung (2006) calls 'countervailing forces'. These forces can be enabled by the setting up of multi-stakeholder panels, financing grassroots organisations to become co-organisers or setting up a broadly-based steering committee. Whatever mechanism is used, such structures can act to counter-balance the weight of the principal sponsoring body or bodies, and thus overcome perhaps the single biggest barrier to empowered participation.

Long time horizons
The second ingredient that makes a participatory process genuinely empowering is the length of time the participative space can be maintained. Past efforts at grassroots community activism described by Clay and Haq (articles 14 and 15), along with the attempts to forge new global participatory structures by the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (article 11) hold powerful lessons for future practice. The Popular Sovereignty Network described by Chavez (article 9) may be a promising model for global development, if it can be sustained.

Reflective practice
Finally, we are encouraged by the increase in our collective capacity, as participatory practitioners, for reflection and learning. Once we constituted a small group whose approach was misunderstood and rejected by mainstream researchers.[5] In response to this hostility, we sometimes spurned critical debate – making us seem almost cult-like to some colleagues

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[5] This was displayed in the frank exchange between practitioners and theorists that followed a critique of participation by anthropologist Paul Richards (1995).

in our lack of reflection on both principles and practice. As resources flooded in, thanks to government enthusiasm for participatory initiatives, we were so busy 'doing', that critical thinking was not prioritised. Participation became attractive to entrepreneurs who adopted the language of empowerment and cherry-picked methodologies that suited them, but ignored the underlying principles, resulting in many examples of pseudo-participation and the disempowerment of the very people to whom such initiatives are meant to deliver a voice.

Now an increasing number of practitioners are dedicating themselves to making regular cycles of learning and reflection core to their practice. The article by Pearce, Pearson and Cameron (article 13) is testament to the inroads into academic culture being made by participatory innovators who can combine practical effectiveness with acceptance from their fellow academics. This is aided by the increasing sympathy for participatory approaches across the global higher education system.

Towards empowered participation?

We acknowledge that there is a general bias towards practice in the UK and Europe in this issue of *PLA*. There is also the danger of assuming that the answers to participatory dilemmas will come from universities rather than elsewhere. That said, both Bradford University's International Centre for Participation Studies and Newcastle University's Policy Ethics and Life Sciences (PEALS) Research Centre have made attempts to develop practice that addresses all three themes of this special issue, though neither would claim more than very partial success.

In 2008, six UK university-based Beacons for Public Engagement began to address a key additional challenge for the future – the use of participatory processes to make the very formation of research questions a process of co-production. This will often involve putting people who have become experts via experience on an equal footing with those who have done so via formal training.[6]

Both *Prajateerpu* (Kuruganti, Pimbert and Wakeford, article 2) and the Nanojury (Singh, article 4) showed that there are potentially great benefits in the blurring of boundaries between people and professors. Those involved in the two processes also came up against a range of powerful barriers that prevent scientists, and other officially recognised experts, from acknowledging and affirming the validity of knowledge that comes through experience rather than formal training.

The professional acceptance of participation within academia is a testament to the many successful participatory projects designed to achieve social and environmental justice at the grassroots. But there is a paradox here. Struggling grassroots community organisations who contribute to the mainstreaming of participatory approaches risk disempowering themselves. In providing legitimacy to academic researchers, they are potentially helping organisations to win grants from funding sources that they might wish to call on. Future participatory processes face significant challenges if they are to help to shift power and knowledge to those who need it, rather than to those who already have it.

Alongside the three recommendations we make – for diverse control, the establishment of long-term processes and acknowledgement of the need to learn from our mistakes – there is a single overriding priority: that the capacity to challenge power structures comes to be acknowledged as fundamental to a just society.

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[6] This is a four-year pilot programme largely funded by the UK government. See the web resources section for further information.

THEME SECTION