



Power tools for participatory learning and action

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Power tools for policy change

This special issue is about tools – techniques, tactics or tips – for achieving positive policy change. Its emphasis on methods, on ways of doing, places it in a strong lineage of past issues of *Participatory Learning and Action*. But do we really need more tools? Surely there are more than enough methods, resources, manuals and toolkits to equip every last participatory tool user in the world?

In the recent anniversary issue of *Participatory Learning and Action* (PLA 50), Robert Chambers gave a thoughtful evaluation of our collective progress in approaches to participation, in its broadest meaning. One observation was that tools do indeed deserve ongoing attention and development, as part of a broader process of social learning. But there are several areas to which we don't yet pay enough attention. Power is chief among these.

The articles in this special issue focus on the intersection between power and tools – specifically on how tools can have a deliberate goal of raising the power of people who have been excluded from decision-making that concerns them. Of course, all legitimate methods for participatory learning and action work to change power relations – but many do not describe their aims in this way. Previous issues of *PLA* have used other terms to express the same funda-

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mental aims and processes. Examples are **social transformation** (Pimbert, 2004) and **people-centred advocacy** (Samuel, 2002). Similarly, using concepts of **rights, participation and power** to inform institutional practice entails more or less the same tools (Pettit and Musyoki, 2004). In all cases, the central principle is that excluded people do not wait to be invited to participate in external processes. Rather, they use their power to create their own policy space, demanding and generating participation on their own terms.

Source and structure of this special issue

The articles in this theme section are all written by partners in the IIED-coordinated Power Tools initiative (under a project entitled 'Sharpening policy tools for marginalised managers

of natural resources' funded by DGIS and BMZ, with additional funds from DFID). The Power Tools initiative involved about 35 partners across Africa, Asia and Latin America over five years. Each partner was working on real and pressing policy problems in their own context. What united the work internationally was a common goal to develop and share policy tools relevant to people who are normally excluded from playing a part in local and national policy around natural resources. We have used a broad view of policy as 'what organisations choose to do', be they government, businesses or local institutions.

The most important output has been progress on problems of equity and marginalisation in land, agriculture, biodiversity and forestry policy wherever this has been possible through application of the methods and tactics. To spread these gains more widely, a set of 26 tool write-ups appear on the Power Tools website (www.policy-powertools.org) in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. These write-ups try to avoid being too prescriptive and formulaic, but rather try to share experience of both what did work and what did not. In this special issue of *Participatory Learning and Action*, eight partners have taken their learning from the Power Tools initiative one step further, reflecting on the wider contexts and implications of their policy tool as a means of securing meaningful and sustainable participation. Before each article we have included summary versions of the policy tool write-ups by these partners.

Interested readers can follow up full versions of these tools by visiting the Power Tools website. On the website are a further 18 tools that are not represented in this issue: tools for organising, understanding, engaging with and ensuring policy influence (see Box 1 for the full set). The website also contains other useful resources, including partners' longer written work and a directory of websites that offer methods, tactics and guidance for participatory policy (see e-participation in the In Touch section of this issue).

Thinking about tools and power

The term 'power tool' conjures up a vision of whirring drills and chainsaws. This analogy is of course deliberate, reminding us that tools are functional and versatile, but they are also potentially very dangerous in ill-meaning or novice hands. A focus on policy tools, rather than on policy problems or policy stories, is useful because it attracts practical people, encouraging us to think not just about what we want to change, but how to do it. On the other hand, too much of an emphasis on tools can promote rigid, repetitive behaviour – ticking off the boxes rather than coming up with imaginative solu-

"Hierarchy", drawn in a workshop during use of the Power Tool Community trade-offs assessment



Credit: Anonymous artist, North Rupununi District Development Board, Guyana

tions. The trick is to share ideas and to spark people's enthusiasm and optimism, but to avoid the impression that there are sure-fire methods that work anywhere anytime. We suspect too that there are no 'new' policy tools, only shinier versions of old favourites.

The Power Tools initiative worked predominantly with allies and supporters to develop tools jointly with people who are sidelined, less powerful or less experienced in natural resources policy. The roles of those supporters and allies are a major factor in whether a particular tactic or technique really does help people empower themselves, or just reinforces unequal power relations. While policy tools can be used to transform – or at least nudge! – power relations, they also have power themselves. Much of the learning from the Power Tools initiative concerned how to get third-party roles to work well, deftly responding to local viewpoints and priorities with relevant (and locally legitimate) innovation from the

Box 1: Power Tools for policy influence at www.policy-powertools.org**Getting started**

Overview of what is involved in improving policies and institutions for the benefit of poor people, based on international experience.

Accessing 'public' information

Set of approaches and tactics to obtain and use information from public agencies, based on experience in India.

Appeal to ethics

Use of ethics-based international agreements and standards to develop dialogue, based on experience in Ethiopia and Vietnam.

Associations for business partnerships

Activities to help smallholders engage with, compete in, and benefit from market economies, based on experience with migrant smallholders in Brazil.

Avante consulta! Effective consultation

Steps to empower communities in negotiation processes, based on experience in Mozambique.

Better business: market chain workshops

Workshops for direct and indirect participants in market chains to share knowledge and inform policy, based on experience in Vietnam.

Community organisations

Organisational options for community groups (cooperatives, trusts etc), based on international experience.

Community trade-offs assessment

Activities for communities to assess different development options in terms of local worldviews and aspirations, based on experience in Guyana.

Connecting communities to markets

Tactics to market independently certified community forest products, based on experience in Brazil.

Family portraits

Description, analysis and communication of how a given family organises labour and other assets, based on experience in Mali.

Good, average, bad: law in action

Framework for scrutinising and improving the practical outcomes of particular legislation, based on experience in Mozambique.

Improving forest justice

Approaches to improve the administration of justice in the timber supply chain, based on experience in Uganda.

Independent forest monitoring

Assessment of the opportunities for IFM to raise accountability, based on experience in Cameroon.

Interactive radio drama

Use of radio to gain public participation in natural resources policy, based on experience in biodiversity conservation in India.

Legal literacy camps

Interactive sessions to familiarise people with legal concepts and current legislation, based on experience with tribal people in India.

Local government accountability

Ways to help rural citizens bring local authorities to account, based on experience in forestry in Malawi.

Media and lobby tactics

Tactics to get national policy to work for small-scale farmers, based on experience in Grenada.

Organising pitsawyers to engage

Framework for developing organisations and business partnerships for small-scale producers, based on experience in Uganda.

People's law

Advice on understanding and utilising law in land and natural resources campaigns, based on experience in Ghana.

Speaking for ourselves

Steps for communities to express their priorities and constraints in professional development language, based on experience with pastoralists in Ethiopia.

Stakeholder influence mapping

Method to examine and visually display the changing policy influence of various social groups, based on experience in Costa Rica, UK and Kenya.

Stakeholder power analysis

Techniques for understanding stakeholder relationships and capacity for change, based on international experience.

Targeting livelihoods evidence

Steps to link natural resources policy with poverty reduction strategies and to develop appropriate monitoring, based on experience with forestry in Uganda.

The four Rs

Framework to clarify and negotiate respective stakeholder roles, based on experience in Zambia and Cameroon.

The pyramid

Framework to stimulate participatory assessment and target-setting in forest governance at national level, based on experience in Brazil.

Writing style: political implications

Approach and checklist to analyse how pieces of writing challenge or support inequalities, based on experience in Zimbabwe.

outside. Positive relationships acknowledge and even benefit from power differences, making use of allies' different abilities and spheres of influence.

Changing power requires understanding power. The partners in the Power Tools initiative did not use or endorse any single analytic framework for thinking about power, as that did not make sense given their varied practical goals and contexts. Indeed, one reason that 'power' is a useful term is because it has a commonsense meaning rather than a difficult academic definition. There are many different ways of looking more closely at power – some useful categories are given in Box 2 (see Vermeulen, 2005 for further references).

Importantly, everyone has power. People who are subordinate possess sources of power absent among élites – such as knowledge, social capital and means of production. People can use this 'counter power' in a variety of ways to oppose, evade or resist oppression.

Along the continuum of approaches, counter power can work in cooperation rather than opposition. Many of the policy tools in this special issue aim at engaging with rather than resisting powerful bodies such as companies and government agencies, albeit engaging tactically rather than playing along with the naïve idea that if stakeholders just sit down and talk, it will all be all right. Using cooperative

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power, as opposed to ‘power over’, different people can work together to achieve shared goals. The notion of cooperative power is very attractive, but we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that it is hard to achieve this kind of ‘win-win’ between very disparate groups. For most people who are excluded from mainstream decision-making processes, any gains in power must be hard fought for, and require more powerful agencies to relinquish some of their control.

Learning from power tools in action

The articles in this theme section discuss real-life experience with power tools, taking the opportunity to reflect on what has worked to promote meaningful participation and policy influence, and what hasn’t worked. Each tool evolved with time and learning to address a specific ‘policy’ need, be it in the realm of local organisation and decision making, regional and national policy formulation, legislation and its applications, or implementation of both policy and law. The resulting spread of policy challenges and associated tools covered here reflects the huge range of barriers faced by less powerful people who want to influence policy – and the many alternative routes and methods for achieving progress. To navigate this diversity, the eight articles included here have, in hindsight, been divided into three sets, described in turn below.

Build power to act

Power can be gained by amassing, constructing and coordinating sources of power (see Box 2). A crucial source of power, especially in the modern context of rapid communications across great distances, is information. Two articles here look at how less powerful people have gained access to information to claim their legal rights to greater policy influence and self-determination. In Article 3, Bose and co-authors chart the experience of Indian civil society movements, including groups of poor people working without

Box 2: Unpacking power

Power is generally understood as an ability to achieve a wanted end in a social context, with or without the consent of others.

Positions of power. The simplest typologies of power are in terms of dualities in relationships, e.g. empowered/disempowered, central/marginal, oppressor/oppressed, dominant/subordinate. These are useful shorthand but they provide only a crude basis for analysing power, because they do not capture the complexity or fluidity of actual power relations, and they deny the power of ‘less powerful’ people. Understanding positions of power in terms of roles, e.g. various characters in a play, can be more helpful.

Mechanisms of power. Understanding how power operates in a particular situation is very useful, allowing us to find strategies to maximise or counter that power. Most simply, power can work through rewards, penalties or conditioning. Conditioned power is especially important as it is institutionalised and often hard to recognise. But it can be either positive (cooperative power to achieve shared goals) or negative (hegemony, in which oppressed people collude in their own oppression).

Sources of power. Key sources of power are capital (financial, natural, physical, social, human), means of production (labour power), consumption, culture, location and geography, information, technology, physicality (e.g. age, sex, health or physical ability) and personality (e.g. charisma or skill). The various sources of power are often also the rewards of power.

Arenas of power. People may have different power relations in different, but overlapping, fields of activity: social, political and economic. Within the social arena, people may behave differently in public (outside the home), private (at home and among friends) and intimate (within the self) realms of power. Economists distinguish ability to set prices (market power) and ability to withdraw from a transaction (bargaining power).

external support, to access what is meant to be ‘public’ information. Getting hold of relevant reports and statistics has recently been enabled by new freedom of information legislation in India, in tune with an international trend (e.g. in the UK) to pass law that improves citizens’ access to information about the activities of government and public agencies. Indian civil society groups have been especially imaginative and tenacious in their pursuit of facts and figures that government departments prefer to keep to themselves. In turn there have been many successes in holding agencies to account and securing better service delivery and good governance for poor people.

Article 5 turns to one state in India, Rajasthan, where indigenous tribal people have in the last decade benefited from new rights to self-rule under national law. Many villages have not yet taken full advantage of this law, partly because

“Wow, John, what a difference! How did our community change so much?”

“It’s a long story, Joseph. Come on, I’ll show you how it all happened...”

From *Mercados para comunidades certificadas* (part of the Power Tool *Connecting communities to markets*)



Cartoon: Rubens de Toledo Frizzo, Imafloira, Brazil

of ignorance or misunderstanding and partly because of feet-dragging at state level. Upadhyay explains how he and fellow Delhi lawyers crossed the divide with tribal communities to enable people to understand the law in their own contexts and to make practical use of it, for example to draw up utilisation certificates that are legally watertight. The experience of *panchayat shivir*, or interactive legal literacy camps, is very much one of learning and adapting on both sides as the process unfurled.

One of the greatest tools that subordinate people have against the prevailing economic, institutional and political bedrock is collective action. Getting organised is a critical feature of successful people's movements around the world. In Article 7, Macqueen and co-authors look at how association has helped small-scale forest enterprises (which are often one person working alone) to make the best of different forms of organisation in Brazil. They offer practical advice for those in forestry and beyond who want to increase their economic power or reach other mutual aims by clubbing together.

Claim the tools of the powerful

Many useful tools, including those designed to facilitate participation, remain in the hands of powerful agencies. Two articles describe the experience of development professionals in their successful endeavours to transfer control of policy tools to the people who are intended to benefit from them. The tools thus become mechanisms of power: communication techniques that express the self-analysis and priorities of marginal people in their own terms but in a language that outsiders comprehend. In Article 9, Belay and co-authors report how communities in Ethiopia have adapted and used the 'sustainable livelihoods' framework to present government agencies with coherent and evidence-based demands for support to their self-development. Article 11 by Cochrane describes how a similarly effective communication tool, known as family portraits, works to counter simplistic caricatures (e.g. of ethnic groups and genders) that prevail among policy makers at all levels. Through learning and training the tool was usefully updated to fit the needs of families in Mali, Kenya and Tanzania.

Take hold of participatory processes

Participation often carries the paradox of being introduced from outside. Even with good intentions, implementing agencies, not intended beneficiaries, retain ultimate power over not just the tools but the entire process. One process that tried to tackle this from the start was development of the Indian National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. In Article 13, Apte reviews the strategies and tactics that worked – and those that failed – in achieving active ownership of the process by actual biodiversity users and managers. Indeed, this external process created an unintentional space for all kinds of local activism around biodiversity (Apte, 2005). Kazoora and co-authors take a close look in Article 15 at how forest law enforcement, not traditionally an arena for participation, has come to use rewards

as well as punishments to establish more just outcomes. Notably, participation has not been given easily – people have had to lobby for it.

Final words

Individual tools may seem too specific and too polite given the scale of power inequities and the radical actions we perhaps need in response. But for many people who live outside of the privileges of police protection, opportunities for legal redress and other services, to find safety and reduce risks to life, livelihoods and reputation can be primary concerns. Hopefully readers will find in this special issue some fresh ideas and refreshed inspiration to keep on making the most of the channels that do exist for change – and creating those that don't.

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