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Contributions on issues of engagement with the policy process

How can citizen juries and related approaches help create spaces for constructive exchanges between key stakeholders? How can they be used to foster effective links between research and advocacy? How can donors engage effectively with democratically elected governments and civil society organisations through the use of participatory approaches, such as citizen juries?

Contributions to this area of the discussion were received from the registrants listed below:

- **Carine Pinotti**, University of Orleans, France
- **Peter Reason**, Professor of Action Research/Practice at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, School of Management, University of Bath, UK

- **Vinita Suryanarayanan**, MAYA, India
- **Brian Wynne**, Centre for the Study of Environmental Change and Chair of the Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University, UK
- **Biksham Gujja**, Coordinator, Freshwater Programme, WWF International, Switzerland
- **Francisco Sagasti**, Director, Agenda, Peru
- **Lindsey Colbourne**, Director, InterAct, UK

A contribution from Carine Pinotti

Understanding *Prajateerpu* through the politics of autonomy

Having had the privilege of being a silent observer of the *Prajateerpu*, I propose to look into four dimensions that set this event apart from other citizens' juries.

1. A majority of women on the jury

A clear and well thought-out decision was made by the organisers of *Prajateerpu*, from the onset, to form a jury with

a majority of women. The rationale for such a decision is at least three-fold:

- well over half of the agricultural work in India is undertaken by women;
- there are stark differences between men's and women's perceptions about farming; and,
- creating a context where rural women feel comfortable enough to voice their concerns, without any interference by men, is essential to the sincere expression of their concerns.

This is precisely what was achieved during the *Prajateerpu*

Expert witness TN Prakash, Professor of Agriculture and Coordinator, Agro Biodiversity Group of National Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), India



Jury members Ganeshra (left) and Paparao (right)



process. Because the jurors' panel was composed of a 'critical number' of women, most of them from low castes, there was no obstacle to any of the jury members speaking up with confidence. There is little doubt, in my view, that the deliberations and the verdict would have taken quite a different course had women not been empowered – as they were – to energetically present their views and concerns throughout this entire process.

This high level of sensitivity to gender concerns on the part of the people who designed *Prajateerpu* and those who worked towards making it a concrete event is highly commendable. It reflects a rare political will to enable rural women to develop a vision tailored to their preoccupations and aspirations.

2. A real space for examining critical livelihood issues

Another strength of this particular citizens' jury lies in the very choice of the subject matter under scrutiny. What we have here is not a narrowly framed question of approval or rejection of a given technology, but a debate around a political, social, and economic model of development for food and farming in a State.

Every step in the elaboration of this citizens' jury concurred towards ensuring that this broad debate could take place: from the selection of Jury members amongst small and marginal farmers from the State, to the careful choice of special witnesses representing a wide range of sectors and interest groups, to the composition of the oversight panel. An innovative methodology was crafted with the same aim in mind of enabling all participants to review the proposed visions in their totality.

I would argue that these efforts were not in vain. Indeed,

as the days unfolded, the panel of jurors acquired a fuller grasp of their role in this process, and the confidence to address a vast array of issues. Gradually departing from questions pertaining to their individual situations, the jury members found more and more effective ways of questioning the special witnesses on the impact of new technologies on their lives, on the differential treatment between farmers of different socio-economic categories, and on the stakes of control and access by producers like them to productive resources.

There was a very strong will, on their part, to connect happenings in their daily life to the larger policies defended or contested by the special witnesses. A juror from Warangal District spoke about the plight of farmers in his region, who are for the great majority of them 'heavily in debt'.

Jurors managed to steer the debate around central livelihood issues, without letting the witnesses stray away for too long into statistical or theoretical considerations. Other core economic or ecological problems addressed by the jurors included low market prices, overproduction, soil fertility depletion, diminishing cattle population, repeated rain failures and health concerns linked to the use of chemicals.

There was no real scope for any of the special witnesses to 'hijack' the process by cornering farmers on the jury into a purely technical or scientific debate, as is so often the case in encounters of this sort. This is not to say that no one attempted the trick. Partha Dasgupta from Syngenta (a leading agro-chemical company) did for instance attempt to conjecture on the alleged interconnectedness between world population, hunger, and genetic engineering, but he was soon brought back into the fold by incisive questions from the jury members, pertaining to their own reality. Thus, *Praja-*

teerpu gave small farmers an opportunity to question practitioners of science, technology, law, and policy from their own standpoint. This is no small achievement.

3. Demystifying the practice of policy making

This event provided a unique forum for a collective and grounded critical analysis of the way in which particular technologies or policies can not only fail to meet their goals, but also actually inhibit the use of local resources and knowledge of people at the grassroots level.

These testimonies show that, more often than is generally admitted, the choice of a particular political and technological course does close off other options, including options that have been used sustainably by people for generations. In weighing the various options presented to them with respect to production, distribution, and marketing of agricultural produce, the jury members essentially tried to assess whether and how each of these could enter into synergy with the practices and modes of organisation they had found to be reliable in their own life experience. Options that appeared to condemn their own means of accessing, managing, and sharing resources were generally rejected; those that did not come under further scrutiny, and adjustments were sometimes proposed.

Clearly, the criteria taken into consideration by farmers in this discerning exercise go far beyond norms of efficiency and progress on which technocrats base their projections. Some technologies were rejected not on account of their inadequacy, but because their nature was found untrustworthy and unappealing. On several occasions, women jurors emphatically referred to their own perceptions about the natural world and their place in it to stake a claim about the unwanted nature of a technology (like gene transfers between species). In other words, they did not hesitate to act on inner feelings and impressions to dismiss some of the proposed options.

It is quite uncommon for such intuitive insights to have a place in debates around scientific, technical, or policy matters. That women jurors would feel sufficiently at ease to express such concerns, and to base policy recommendations on them is, in my view, a sign that the *Prajateerpu* really offered them a space where all meaningful matters could be raised.

4. The politics of autonomy and contentment

Much of the jury's verdict speaks to a quest for autonomy. In fact, it tells us that the aspiration to build up self-reliance is not just a marginal concern, but quite a central one to small and marginal farmers. That the entire verdict would be lined with this fundamental concern came to me as a surprise. In my view, this outcome has much to do with the ample space

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given to women farmers, from the onset and over the entire process, to express their own set of convictions and concerns. This is undeniably one of the greatest merits of *Prajateerpu*.

The question one is left with, then, is whether strands of independent thought and action at the grassroots level are compatible with a 'development' approach, insofar as development, however participatory it is made out to be, entails the growth of the organised sector, market expansion, and the promotion of lending institutions (including micro-credit). If the corpus of improved technologies, management schemes and regulatory agencies that governments and donors seek to implement – as illustrated by *Vision 2020* – is shown to effectively inhibit communities from acting on their own terms, then should the very foundations of policy-making and aid not be reconsidered?

Testimonies by farmers on the jury suggest no number of development schemes elaborated by external agents can replace the multitude of ideas that germinate in the mind of people when they are empowered to look out for their own solutions. The verdict calls for a shift in policy-making processes, whereby policies are crafted in such a way as to strengthen the practices that ensure self-sustaining livelihoods for rural communities, instead of undermining them.

All things considered, maybe it is not such a bewildering turn of events that DFID-India felt inclined to reject the *Prajateerpu* report. When a pioneering approach stirs the ground beneath the feet of those at the top of the political and economic ladder, how else can we expect them to react, initially, but by attempting to consolidate their position? But as time passes, an alternative course – that of recognising the legitimacy of a constructive critique addressed to them and engaging in dialogue – may well emerge.

Over and above these speculations about the willingness of the people without any attachment to the land to give due consideration to the concerns of people from the land, I would like to acclaim the Andhra Pradesh *Prajateerpu* as a very sensible, balanced, and mature exercise in the nascent movement of participatory democracy.

Day two: the jury watch one of the three video scenario presentations



A contribution from Peter Reason

While not in any way involved in the *Prajateerpu* project, I would like to add some comments to the debate from the perspective of participatory research methodology. Participatory forms of inquiry are not simply alternative social science methods to be added to the toolkit of social scientists, for they represent a fundamentally different orientation to the nature of inquiry and what we take as knowledge, as both John Gaventa and Brian Wynne have already pointed out in this exchange: Gaventa points out that knowledge can no longer be seen as neutral in a positivist sense, Wynne to the unavoidable relationships between knowledge, power, and politics. So we need to extend and amplify our understanding of the nature of quality or validity in action research. One important criterion of quality in action research is that it opens new communicative spaces in which democratic inquiry can take place, a point well made by Stephen Kemmis exploring the contribution of Habermas' critical theory in his contribution to the *Handbook of Action Research*. Bjørn Gustavsen, at the Work Research Institute in Norway, argues that we can only base social inquiry on the institutions of democracy, however ambiguous and many sided this concept may be. Democracy can never be perfect, but is the only starting point.

Democratic inquiry is never final, but rather emergent. So a second important criterion of quality is whether the work has contributed to the emergence of a wide community of inquiry amongst divergent stakeholders? Do all those involved increase their ability to inquire and learn together? Does it provide ways in which silenced voices may increasingly be heard? Do formal scientific and policy voices find ways to communicate with informal and local voices? A citizens' jury may be seen as flawed when taken in isolation, but

as part of an emerging process of democratic debate it may be seen in a much more positive light. So I suggest in judging the quality of participative action research we must stop looking for final answers and concern ourselves more with the processes of emerging democratic engagement. To argue about whether we have got the representation, the evidence, the conclusions 'right' in this case is in some ways to miss the point: of course these issues are important, but in a large, complex, and immensely controversial issue such as this one there will be never be one best way. What is much more important is whether we have contributed to a widening of informed and inquiring dialogue.

A contribution from Vinita Suryanarayanan

Citizens' juries/any other similar participatory approaches need to become part of ongoing processes at the local level rather than be 'set up' or 'called for' only when organisations or donors feel the need. This does not imply merely setting up a mechanism but calls for a re-haul of the dominant thinking, to believe that policy decisions need to evolve from people's own needs, interests, and aspirations.

To ensure a constructive exchange, the process should facilitate the representative individuals to articulate their needs in an empowering manner rather than voice their demands and needs as a petition alone.

Two issues remain unresolved:

- looking at the 'self' as a collective-self rather than restrict it to individual needs and interests alone; and,
- designing the stakeholder engagement exercise so that it does not stop with the issue at hand, but instead empowers the participants and the people they represent and sets in play an ongoing process of discussion, action, and reflection.

A contribution from Vinita Suryanarayanan

Developing any effective policy requires a long-term vision of developmental planning. At the heart of the process of policy formulation is the articulation of people in the State – whether they are elected representatives, members of local collectives, communities across the various strata of society in villages and urban areas – citizens, at large. The process of collective articulation would lead to the crystallisation of a collective vision, which would then form the policy. A policy directive cannot only be a statement of intent. The institutional mechanisms that would translate the policy into reality and the clear fixing of accountability on relevant agencies has to be an inherent part of the policy itself. In addition, an institutional structure that would ensure citizens' participation that will work at monitoring and supporting the implementation of the policy needs to be set up.

At present the tendency of many organisations is to try to influence a particular Government's development agenda that does not necessarily contain policies and exists so long as the Government exists. This agenda reflects a limited perspective towards addressing certain issues – be it education, health, technology – that is manifest in corresponding schemes and programmes, which are often populist measures. Influencing policy does not imply making cosmetic changes in archaic authoritative guidelines of schemes that have assumed the form of Government policies. It is about mobilising community demand, action, and self-organisation towards the vision. The existing structure assumes that there is a policy that will translate into schemes and have a trickle-down effect. How can this 'policy' – devoid of a vision – translate into something useful?

A contribution from Brian Wynne **Escaping the hegemony of (singular) modernisation**

That hitherto largely unheard voices of poor Indian farmers and their messengers (in this case Pimbert-Wakeford and the team involved) provided a vision of 'development' which on the face of it looks like 'non-development', also needs serious and public reflection and debate. [T]his situation is not that different in fundamentals from the situation which prevails with respect to 'development', 'further modernisation', and the global knowledge-economy etc., in otherwise hugely different developed-world societies. Faced with various expert schemes – for example to 'modernise' food production and distribution – a typical European public response (see for example: www.pabe.net) is not usually decisively pro- or anti. Instead it looks for honest debate about: 'Who needs this? Why is it being done?' This is not at all an anti-technology worldview; many such respondents indicate their gratitude that modern convenience food (and food-technologies like microwaves for example) has been made available...

...To see the alternative scientific opportunities requires commitment, imagination, and reflection by scientific and technical experts helped by those public voices... ..A striking aspect of the process which the *Prajateerpu* report describes for eliciting the farmers' meanings is that nowhere do the facilitators challenge the farmers, as a 'Devil's Advocate' move in eliciting responses. This is often used in similar research situations to challenge them to elaborate their reasons for defending a particular stance, which provides more fieldwork data and insight, including more clues to tacit culturally embedded assumptions, habits of thought etc., which would not otherwise emerge. Perhaps the sensitivities described concerning the need to break down the farmers'

Kavitha Kuruganti, one of the facilitators who helped in briefing the jury and preparing the verdict



extreme inhibitions and insecurities about these processes justify the avoidance of any forms of challenge – but on the other hand the respondents are described as pretty robust, especially after the initial phases, so it is worth asking whether this 'challenge' strategy should have been used at appropriate times in the deliberations which were conducted. Maybe it was used – but if so, it escaped description.

Research engagements

I do think that the *Prajateerpu* methodological strategy as described in section 4.2 of the report (p. 38–39, 'Balance between Research and Emancipation') is flawed in at least one respect. To my mind this section draws an artificially sharp dichotomy between 'mere social research' and 'qualitative research' of a participatory kind like *Prajateerpu*. The distinction based on the notion that the former 'takes information, experiences, and knowledge from their subjects without giving anything back' (p.38) seems to reflect a very narrow notion of what 'giving something back' may involve. Many 'mere' social research projects which are participatory only to the extent of using interviews, focus groups, surveys, or whatever else from the conventional methodological toolbox (thus not 'participatory' in Pimbert and Wakeford's terms) nevertheless give much back in the ways in which they communicate to policy actors amongst others, the complexities, hidden exploitations, perverse unintended effects of policies, etc., imposed on ordinary citizens by institutional behaviours.

In this sense they represent powerless citizens to the powerful, in ways that those citizens alone may never have the chance to do. Just because they may not thereby give anything much back directly to their respondents does not mean they do not give anything back on their behalf. Of

course the authors' criticism is often true that research into public attitudes, opinions, or preferences can be used cynically by policy makers to make it appear that policy is based on democratic public inputs; but this does not make the attempt by conventional social researchers accurately and validly to represent otherwise silent publics to policy actors an intrinsically 'take only' research method.

The vision which they put forward – borrowing from the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu – of 'helping citizens to make sense of their reality, then working towards creating opportunities to change it', has already been extensively attempted in social research, but without any presumption that this necessarily involves a direct assault on supposedly deliberate political repression and neglect.¹ It may involve trying to enlighten policy makers and advisers about public meanings, for example that concerns about GM crops may not be based on exaggerated risk-concerns, but upon the public experience of hubris and ethical irresponsibility of the institutions promoting and governing the technology. This social research – 'take-only' in Pimbert-Wakeford definitions – can help change dominant public meanings assumed by powerful institutions, by eliciting and giving respect to autonomous public meanings of the issues which scientifically cultured policy-making assumes to be scientific only (safety, for example). This empirically grounded cross-examination and contradiction of power's self-serving 'natural' narratives and imposed public meanings can help empower more democratic forces in society. This of course involves extravagant doses of faith and hope – but given the state of the world, so does any other approach!

Maybe there are important differences between the aim of empowerment of particular voiceless and vulnerable sectors of society, like the poorest most insecure farmers of Andhra Pradesh, and that of attempting more simply to make democracy, including what power-hierarchies exist, to be more humane, reflexive, intelligent, and modest. I cannot see them as other than differences of degree and particular context. If one were to exercise the fully dichotomised strategic methodological assumptions that Pimbert-Wakeford express, this would risk gratuitously limiting the possible insights into the complexities and maybe the potentialities of the situations of interest to us.

¹ Guest editors' note: Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist, anthropologist, philosopher, and champion of the anti-globalisation movement, whose work spanned a broad range of subjects from ethnography to art, literature, education, language, cultural tastes, and television. His most famous book is *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), which was named one of the 20th Century's ten most important works of sociology by the International Sociological Association.

Expert witness, Alexander Daniels, General Secretary, International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), Asia



A contribution from Biksham Gujja

This [question of engagement], for me, is the key issue. The debate surrounding *Prajateerpu* should be looked at in this context. People in many countries – including less developed countries (LDCs) – do not have space or scope to engage in larger policy processes that affect them and their families. Take the State of Andhra Pradesh as an example. Everyone knows the State is taking questionable loans from many sources, some of which are being used to benefit certain interest groups and not the majority. This is not a secret and many people are airing their concerns about it, but powerful groups continue to do what they like.

In the same way, articulating critical opinions of governments and donors is fine as long as one does not challenge their policies directly. Many NGOs have raised this as a major issue. Rarely have people, particularly poor people, been engaged in larger policy debates. So far, donors have used participatory approaches whenever it has suited them. Sometimes this has led to positive outcomes, and sometimes, it must be said, this has contributed to undermining and short-circuiting democratically elected governments – which in effect are an expression of the 'will of the people'. Now some 'elected governments' too have learned how to employ 'participatory techniques' to legitimise their actions – generally more for the benefit of donors than for the people. *Prajateerpu* should be looked in this context. For the first time a citizens' jury, with all its imperfections and limitations, has debated an important policy issue. The outcome may or may not be to everyone's satisfaction, including the donors. For the donors, the participatory approaches (e.g. involvement of women etc.) are very handy in cornering governments. But when the same approaches are used to question their 'pro-poor' credentials, they reply by raising 'procedural issues'.

Baayakka, jury member

'This question of engagement for me is the key issue. The debate surrounding *Prajateerpu* should be looked at in this context. People in many countries – including less developed countries – do not have space or scope to engage in larger policy processes that affect them and their families'

A contribution from Francisco Sagasti

On the basis of the research results presented in the *Prajateerpu* report, I would be rather hesitant to derive any wider implications from the study, even for future development assistance in Andhra Pradesh. For example, although the report rightly criticises the insensitivity of many external interventions in promoting the modernisation of traditional agriculture, it appears to be unaware that – despite the researchers' attempts to introduce checks and balances into the research design (such as the use of an oversight panel) – their work could be also seen as being insensitive to the views of the rural poor. They may prefer a more modern lifestyle and alternative employment opportunities, and enjoy the benefits that technological advances and markets can bring. The research design all but assured that these views would not find an expression in the project. While trying to correct for the biases of external interventions by institutions like the World Bank, and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the authors seem to have inadvertently introduced their own biases into the study.

This report has reinforced my view that, when dealing with contentious issues such as the ones in this report, it is necessary for policy- and action-oriented research to consider and include the views of all the agents that may be affected by the results. For example, I would have liked to see statements from representatives of the government of Andhra Pradesh, the World Bank and DFID reacting to the conclusions reached by the researchers (possibly in the form of an appendix to the report). Perhaps this should become standard practice in the future.

A contribution from Lindsey Colbourne

As a designer and facilitator of participatory processes

(outside the academic world, and mostly focused on the UK) I am intrigued by this very effective use of a traditional consultation technique used by decision-making bodies as a lobbying/scrutiny tool by a set of organisations outside government – using consultation to bridge the gap between research and advocacy. Who would have thought that hearing people's views could be so powerful? This use of a consultation method as a lobbying/scrutiny tool raises a number of issues for me, not least:

- The possibility that consultation done by others to inform a decision-making body could be more powerful (as well as obviously more independent) than when the decision-making body does the consultation themselves. Should we always ensure externally managed processes?
- This leads me to the importance of an independent 'convenor' in the process, whose integrity cannot be challenged because they have no agenda of their own, other than to have as constructive a consultation as possible (i.e. their only focus is the process). The use of 'consultation' as a lobbying/advocacy tool is clearly difficult as the commissioning organisation would not be able to determine the outcome – it might be that the outcome would be counter to its own interests/views. It might be more useful to consider the consultation as part of a scrutiny function – holding the decision maker to account – and carried out by an independent process manager.
- In the *Prajateerpu* process it seems that the commissioners of the 'consultation' have become embroiled in debate – their independence/integrity has been challenged, perhaps because they put too much 'spin' on the report. So a key decision-making organisation is ...able to discount the results. It might be more powerful therefore to separate the roles of an independent convenor (who runs the process, produces the report), and interested parties commissioning the process who can use the results as they wish.
- This then leads to the importance of being clear with partic-

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ipants about how the results will be used to influence the decision makers. In a classic consultation/dialogue situation the decision maker says they will listen to the results (admittedly a process that it is very hard to hold them account-

able to, except in situations of very strong consensus reactions) and/or participants are able to decide themselves how they will use the results and are empowered to act on them. In neither of these situations (in theory at least) is there a need to turn the result into any kind of lobbying process. So new 'rules of engagement' may need to be written which set out in agreement with participants how the results may be used. (I guess in some situations it might even become dangerous for participants to be associated with the lobbying that is done on the back of their given opinion...)

- All this points to the fact that, as participation increases, and both 'sides' (the consulted, the decision makers) get more canny about how they can use/manipulate the outcomes, then more formal and careful use of techniques such as stakeholder analysis, independent reporting/monitoring, evaluation etc will be essential.

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