

ARTICLE

Prajateerpu, power and knowledge

The politics of participatory action research in development
Part 2. Analysis, reflections and implications

Tom Wakeford¹

University of Newcastle

Michel Pimbert²

International Institute for Environment and Development

ABSTRACT

We examine the roles of the diverse co-inquirers involved in the power-equalizing action research project known as *Prajateerpu*. While privileging neither official expertise nor experiential knowledge over the other, we suggest the need to create arenas where expert knowledge is put under public scrutiny as a means of contributing to a redressing of the power imbalance that exists between the poor and elite social groups. We emphasize the important tensions that arose in *Prajateerpu* between the views of those participants whose analysis had become marginalized from decision-making processes and those who were in positions of power. Having reflected on the role of various actors in the two-year process, we look at the potential contributions processes such as *Prajateerpu* could make towards processes that aim to democratize knowledge and promote social justice.

KEY WORDS

- co-inquiry
- deliberative democracy
- power-equalizing action research

Introduction

In a previous article (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2003) we outlined the origins and dynamics of an action research project that we undertook with our Indian co-inquirers. This project involved members of some of India's most marginalized communities.³ Called by its local language name, *Prajateerpu*, the research centred on a series of hearings prompted by the proposal of a development programme designed to transform all aspects of social and economic life in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) over the next 20 years.⁴ Vision 2020 was developed by management consultants McKinsey and Co. along with the Government of AP (GoAP). The World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) are the main external funders supporting its implementation. *Prajateerpu* was devised as a means of allowing those people most affected by Vision 2020 to shape a vision of their own.

In this article, we examine the contributions of different co-inquirers in the action research process, together with the institutions and policy makers who responded to its findings. In the aftermath we make a provisional assessment of the extent to which *Prajateerpu* led to an equalizing of knowledge–power relations among members of an extended community of inquiry. We also explore the extent to which it created a useful arena for debate at a national and international level for an analysis of local realities by socioeconomically marginal citizens. Whilst appreciating that our perspective is only partial and that others may draw different lessons from the *Prajateerpu* process, we also attempt to suggest how the effectiveness of action research processes in politically charged arenas can be improved.

Part A: The role and insights of co-inquirers

Marginalized communities

The core group of Indian and UK-based co-inquirers began from an awareness that the views of small farmers, and those of other marginalized rural communities whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, had been almost entirely excluded from decision making during the formation of Vision 2020. These key actors therefore made up the main social group that we sought to bring into the co-inquiry process as analysts of their local realities and developers of a vision for the future of rural life that could be compared to that already being implemented by their government.

The public hearings and safe spaces for action inquiry that lay at the heart of the *Prajateerpu* process allowed participants from marginalized communities to build a common understanding of the forces shaping agricultural futures in

their region, and also to question decision makers and those with specialist knowledge on food and farming issues.

The hearings and subsequent deliberations demonstrated the proficiency with which a jury of farmers, many of whom had not finished basic schooling, or were non-literate, could discuss technical issues to which they had no previous exposure. They achieved this by carefully eliciting from each witness the information relevant to their livelihoods. Equipped with their own expertise, they asked whether Vision 2020 could address their specific needs, such as returning organic matter to their soils and reducing their susceptibility to rapidly changing market prices for their harvested produce.

Commenting on how the farmers validated their own knowledge and assessed information which was presented to them by outsiders, a member of the project's Oversight Panel said:

What was most interesting was the fact that farmers, on the basis of their knowledge, wisdom and feelings, rather quickly understood what they are dealing with. . . . What amazed me indeed was that they immediately knew whether what was being told to them was nonsense or propaganda or whether it had some meaning. And that of course gives hope that there is still this wisdom available amongst them to judge what is useful, what is genuine and what is not. (Paul Ter Weil quoted in Pimbert and Wakeford 2002a, p. 53)

In both legal and non-legal contexts, the inexperience of the jury in the technical aspects of a complex case has been used to discount an embarrassing verdict, when in fact it was its own expert evidence that was deficient. The assessment of jury competence is thus inevitably a politically charged process. Studies comparing the decisions reached by jurors with those reached by judicial experts found that the same verdicts were reached in 75–80 percent of cases (Lempert, 1993). This proportion did not change in complex as opposed to less complex cases. The contrasting political interests of the social actors involved in the *Prajateerpu* project should therefore be borne in mind when considering the responses of actors who agree or disagree with the *Prajateerpu* verdict.

Having listened to the witnesses and discussed the issue, the jury in *Prajateerpu* found that the policy and technical package of Vision 2020 was unacceptable to them. But their verdict was not a simple 'no'. They put forward their own carefully considered vision of the future of food and farming, with a wide-ranging list of demands detailing what action should be taken by the government, civil society organizations and foreign aid agencies to implement their vision. The actual process of deriving a common vision was in itself a remarkable effort by the jurors to organize their plural and diverse views into a jointly owned verdict and to validate their own knowledge. As one facilitator commented:

The verdict was amazingly comprehensive. It encompassed many differences, a variety of agro-ecosystems, and different local economies, cultural backgrounds, and social backgrounds. This was the case with the jury itself. But all [their requirements,

desires and demands] could be merged, to come up with salient features of a common vision. (Kavitha Kuruganti)

Except for one urban consumer, all the jurors were experienced agriculturalists. The presence of a majority of women on the jury chosen for the *Prajateerpu* hearings also meant that there was considerable local knowledge about food processing and preparation, storage technology and the other dimensions of household food security. The citizens' jury method (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2003) helped to bring greater equality to the knowledge–power relations between those conventionally regarded as experts and those dismissed as comparatively ignorant and in need of educating. This process was particularly striking because areas such as development economics, farm policy and agricultural genetics are highly technical, male-dominated and normally immune to public scrutiny.

The sophisticated way in which marginalized farmers untrained in development economics, science and policy making were able as members of the jury to develop an insightful critique of 'official' knowledge and policy processes mirrors previous studies such as: those of the popular epidemiology movement (Brown, 1993; Watterson, 2002); the use of indigenous knowledge by sheep farmers in Cumbria, UK in the aftermath of Chernobyl (Irwin & Wynne, 1996); and policy work such as the recent GM Jury (PEALS, 2003). It also highlighted a recurring mismatch between the prescriptions of development professionals and local realities (Chambers, 1993; Long, 2001; Richards, 1985; Vasavi, 1999a, 1999b).

While it was obvious that farmers knew far more about the practicalities of agriculture and marketing food than any of the witnesses, it was also clear that jurors valued and recognized external knowledge. They all showed a keen interest in, and actively engaged with, the information presented to them in videos showing different future scenarios and by the witnesses.

After listening to the witnesses and discussing the issues among themselves, the jury asked questions framed from their *own* life experience and livelihood contexts. This usually meant that the jury's questions had a more holistic quality than the arguments presented by some subject matter specialists. Examples of jury reactions to specialist witness presentations include:

- 'If low food production and high population is the problem, how come I have so much surplus which I cannot market, lying in my house? And the same with others in my village? Why did our Chief Minister ask for production to be lowered?' (Samaya asked these questions after the corporate representative from Syngenta linked GM technology with the food needs of a rapidly growing human population).
- 'What does anyone get out of tobacco and cotton, why should the government support it?' (Philip asked this when statistics related to the widespread cultivation and productivity of these crops were proudly read out by AP government officials along with ambitious plans for the future).

- ‘What about loss of life?’ (Deveenama asked when the Deputy Commissioner and Deputy Director of Agriculture for AP announced that the government was developing agreements with agri-chemical corporations to ensure they reimburse farmers for crop losses caused by the sale of spurious products).

Specialists and information providers

Jurors in *Prajateerpu* were presented with three different scenarios or visions of the future. Each scenario was presented using a 30-minute video and by a number of witnesses – key opinion formers and specialists who explained the thinking behind a particular scenario.

These 13 individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds all had a proven track record of engagement with elements of the scenarios and were broadly representative of government, industry and civil society. Each specialist witness agreed to address the jurors directly and also to be open to cross examination.

Although their professional roles should have required them to be aware of the social and environmental implications of their policy or technical proposals, those witnesses who supported the mechanization of agriculture in AP repeatedly gave answers to questions on this aspect of Vision 2020 that the jurors felt were evasive or ill-informed. The knowledge and life experience of some specialists was shown to be inadequate when asked by the farmers to think through the costs and benefits of the government’s proposed changes.

My interactions with some of the experts also show that they are essentially technocrats. All that they have considered is the problem from the technical point of view. But the social dimensions, the other consequences of the problem, they are not even faintly aware. And when you ask them have you considered this, they will say no. (Justice Sawant, chair of the Oversight Panel)

Witnesses who had never before experienced participatory dialogues commented on both the value of the farmers’ knowledge and the pertinence of the questions jurors asked them. A senior government advisor on agricultural policies and the representative of Syngenta expressed their appreciation of the jury’s knowledge as follows:

It is a new experience in the sense that we are telling our ideas, our strategies, etc. And there is an immediate reaction from the jury group, from both the men and women who are participating here. I am delighted to see their interest, delighted to see their knowledge and also their curiosity. (Professor MV Rao)

Basically a process of learning for me. The way people asked questions was absolutely unexpected. I did not really know what were their feelings, what were their experiences, what kind of questions they were going to ask. Absolutely, a completely new process of learning for me. (Dr Partha Dasgupta)

The value of combining different types of knowledge (local and external) into a holistic analysis through the *Prajateerpu* process was repeatedly mentioned by participants and observers.

The interaction . . . is educating both the farmers about what ought to be done as well as the policy makers about whether their policies are in the right direction or not. And I believe both of them are learning from each other. (Justice Sawant)

There have been frequent calls for democratizing the production of knowledge and policy processes in an age of uncertainty by directly involving ‘extended peer communities’ (Funtowicz, 2002, p. 3). But relatively few processes have been established that include groups such as farmers, forest dwellers, fishing communities, and rural and urban people in the production and sharing of knowledge that affects their lives (Irwin, 1995; Kloppenburg, 1991; Pimbert, 1994). In this respect, *Prajateerpu* has generated and validated new knowledge on how policy processes on food and farming might be democratized and shown means whereby official knowledge can be made more accountable to citizens.

The interactions that took place between jurors and witnesses in *Prajateerpu* clearly led to mutual learning in both groups. Although much of what they discussed was politically charged, there seemed an acknowledgement in both groups that there was value in hearing the perspective of the other. The willingness by many specialists to accept that non-specialists were capable of contributing valid knowledge to discussions about future technological and economic development mirrors other action learning processes of this kind in a variety of contexts, including projects sponsored by elite scientific institutions such as: the UK’s Royal Society and research councils (Dunkerley & Glasner, 1998; Royal Society, 2003); the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi Arid Tropics (Pimbert, 1991); as well as transnational corporations such as Unilever (PEALS, 2003).

Action researchers (MP and TW)

Having been trained as natural scientists, both of us were schooled within a positivist framework for knowledge validation. Like many others, we have both found that such an approach to learning and action can often obscure as much as enlighten. Our collaboration in *Prajateerpu* was undertaken in the belief that democratically constructing a pluralistic set of truths and subjectivities is far more likely to produce robust knowledge than the positivist’s search for a singularly objective standpoint or observer-independent truth (Kamminga, 1995). In collaboration with each other and Indian partners, we wanted to use *Prajateerpu* as an experiment that would explore more holistic, inclusive and democratic ways of knowing and acting in the world. In our interactions with our co-inquirers we formed the view that it would be wrong to see *Prajateerpu* as yet another set of radically new methods of research, each with their own novel terminologies. Instead, like the

pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, we saw the practices it involved as nothing more than the use of good democratic practices (Reason, 2003).

In designing *Prajateerpu* as a deliberative and participatory process, our strategy was aimed at overcoming the partial and incomplete nature of different methodologies (for example, scenario workshops, participatory video, citizens juries, stakeholder panels) by combining them in a particular sequence so that the internal rigour and credibility of the whole exercise in deliberative democracy was greater than the sum of its parts.

As practitioners who were openly seeking to carry out power-equalizing action research, we did not seek to divorce our personal values, feelings and motivations from research. Nor do we see this way of knowing as damaging to science and/or the reputation of scholarly research centres. As Rahman argues:

Any observation, whether it is detached or involved, is value biased, and this is not where the scientific character or knowledge is determined. The scientific character or objectivity of knowledge rests on its social verifiability and this depends on consensus as to the method of verification. There exist different epistemological schools (paradigms) with different verification systems, and all scientific knowledge in this sense is relative to the paradigm to which it belongs. (Rahman, 1991, pp. 14–15)

We felt that the approach we took would be more likely to allow marginalized communities a voice in political decisions than conventional participatory exercises, which have been the subject of heavy criticism (see, for example, Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Smith, 1999). However, this was not an attempt to promote the knowledge of small farmers and other members of marginalized rural communities as somehow being superior to that of professionals from elite institutions. We recognize the value of the contributions both groups can make to decisions on the future of rural AP and the particular value of allowing each group to be better informed by the other. However, given the exclusion of the voices of small farmers from the debate on Vision 2020, we had no hesitation in attempting to help them create a political space for their views to be heard. Their perspectives were therefore given more prominence than those of the professionals who had already helped to shape regional and global policies on rural development and the use of capital intensive technologies such as GM crops.

Because the issues that *Prajateerpu* addressed – particularly the introduction of GM crops and the displacement of millions of rural people – had already been the subject of public controversy, we were very aware that the research would be subject to particular scrutiny. We therefore attempted to build safeguards into the *Prajateerpu* process to ensure it was credible, trustworthy, fair and not captured by any interest group or perspective. While aiming for methodological rigour, we did not aim to satisfy naïve notions of ‘objective truth’. Instead our prime concern was meeting broader criteria of process validity, including quality and inclusivity of deliberation, and diverse control (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2003).

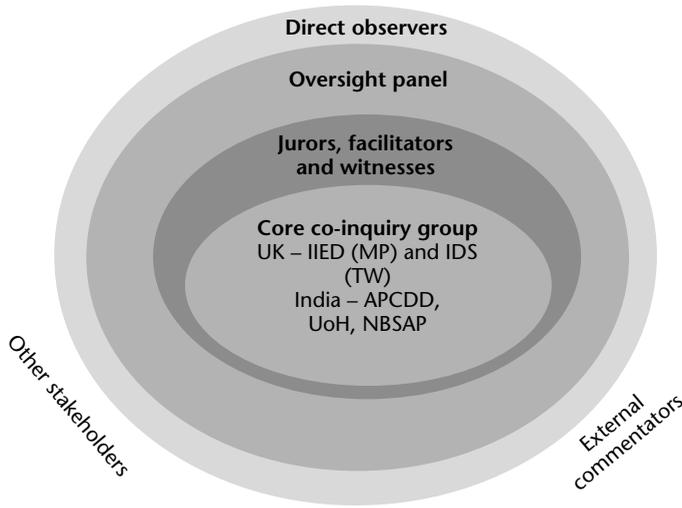


Figure 1 Multiple levels of co-inquiry in *Prajateerpu*

Notes: IIED – International Institute for Environment and Development, Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme; IDS – Institute for Development Studies, Environment Group; APCDD – Andhra Pradesh Coalition in Defence of Diversity; NBSAP – All-India National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan; UoH – University of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

None of the organizers of *Prajateerpu* claims to have designed and facilitated a perfect and flawless deliberative process. The approach taken inevitably generated some tensions, compromises, imperfections, mistakes, limitations and omissions (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2002a).⁵

Although the core co-inquiry group that had initiated the *Prajateerpu* process involved individuals and organizations in the UK and India, we also acknowledged that the knowledge and experience that would be necessary to create the highest quality deliberative process would have to come from a wider group of co-inquirers, listed in the outer sections of Figure 1. We tried to make the most of the opportunities for reflection with this diverse and experienced community. We implemented a structured process that allowed for in-depth feedback between jurors, facilitators, oversight panel members and the core group of organizers. These multiple levels of co-inquiry were therefore key safeguards in the process. We attempted to minimize the chances of disputes and misunderstandings arising between these groups by maximizing the opportunities for their interaction during the process.

At the end of each day’s hearings, and often during breaks during the day,

the facilitators met with jurors to allow them to explore collectively their feelings, doubts, views and preliminary conclusions. During the evening, the facilitators fed the jurors comments in a meeting comprising themselves, oversight panel members and the core group of organizers. In this way we were able to adapt the inquiry process as the hearings proceeded.

If additional financial resources and time had been available it would have been desirable to have had a number of opportunities for occasions such as this in the weeks and months before the hearings began, as has taken place in other jury processes (PEALS, 2003). However, the logistical constraints meant that communication between co-inquirers in India and the UK tended to either be conducted within each country's group of co-inquirers, or on a one-to-one basis between researchers in different countries.

The design of *Prajateerpu* ensured that citizens involved in the participatory dialogues were linked to wider policy networks and the dynamics of policy changes. The results of the jury process had a significant impact on global media and public debates. *Prajateerpu* seems to have catalyzed and informed a broad community of inquiry, with potentially enduring consequences for several of the individuals and organizations involved. The immediate outcomes of the *Prajateerpu* have been used by its co-inquirers and civil society groups to influence advisory committees, technical bodies and civil servants connected to policy making.

Institutions and policy spaces

The vision of food and farming futures that was generated by jurors in *Prajateerpu* hearings was in many ways fundamentally different from that which underpins some major development institutions, and the organizations that fund them. The response of these institutions and the individuals within them was particularly interesting. We found the full range of reactions – from constructive engagement to attempts to marginalize the knowledge generated by the *Prajateerpu* hearings and the team of co-researchers who collaborated on it.

At one end of the spectrum of researchers was witness Agbal Rao, the Deputy Commissioner and Director of Agriculture for the Government of AP. Despite being criticized by members of the jury, he was polite and constructive when interviewed by the co-inquirers.

This is unique. I have never seen this anywhere. We are doing so many training programmes with farmers. Thousands of farmers are being trained every year in different technical aspects of agriculture. But this court-like thing is now a new system which was introduced by the organizers. I congratulate the organizers for introducing such a new approach and for exposing the problems of farmers and learning the solutions for those problems. (Agbal Rao)

Many of the direct observers commented on the value of the actual process of bringing differently situated participants into forward looking, critical deliberations and future visioning exercises. In the words of an Oversight Panel member:

The methodology used here is excellent and I can already see how to adapt the principles to other situations. The citizens' jury process can be used to look at the future of food and farming with other groups like landless labourers in AP. I also think we could easily adapt the methodology to look at the fate of weavers in the textile sector and sex workers in India. (Sandeep Chachra)

One of the Oversight Panel members commented that he would like *Prajateerpu* to be part of a more widespread and longer term process that enables farmers to revalidate traditional knowledge that may have been lost during the Green Revolution and to become agents of political change in their own right.

Personally I am more in favour of longer term learning processes, to support long-term learning processes in the community, and then this kind of thing could happen once in a while. . . . There has been 20 to 30 years of top-down agricultural extension, imposing decisions on farmers, imposing information on farmers – often distorted information – which came down in a cascade of training and visits and so on, giving only fragmented messages to farmers. If you are really serious about revitalizing agriculture or the strengths of ecosystems, then you have to provide farmers with a learning environment in which they themselves actively refine themselves in their relationship with nature. If we want to, if we are serious about listening to farmers, then after this period of imposing on them we should provide them with an opportunity to recoup and to regain their self-confidence and start again doing farming as they have been doing it [by] looking at an ecosystem, at the soil needs, what kind of plants fits their ecosystem with the climate and the availability of water, etc. (Paul ter Weil)

The launch of the *Prajateerpu* report (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2002a) in the UK parliament on 18 March 2002 was particularly successful in amplifying the voices of small and marginalized farmers in the global arena. One of the jury's requests in its verdict was that 'aid from white people' should benefit its intended recipients, which it was not doing at present. The *Prajateerpu* co-inquirers paid for one of the members of the citizens jury (Mrs Anjamma) to travel from her village in AP (India) in order to present the jury's verdict in the House of Commons. IIED's communications team wrote a press release for the report launch, which was a joint event between IIED and IDS, held at Portcullis House, Palace of Westminster. IIED's director sent a letter to the Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, inviting her and several colleagues to attend the report launch. Neither Ms Short, nor any of her staff, chose to attend.

In the weeks that followed Mrs Anjamma's intervention, several articles on *Prajateerpu* and Vision 2020 appeared in national newspapers and the more

specialized press.⁶ For campaigners in Andhra Pradesh, the jury result, together with the considerable press coverage in India and the UK, were extremely useful in that they strengthened advocacy work directed at the reform of Vision 2020 and its components (such as contract farming, GM technologies and displacement of small farmers). The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 2001 was criticized by several participants and observers of *Prajateerpu* for not paying sufficient attention to the views of the poor on GMOs and simply assuming that the new biotechnologies might be appropriate to meet the agricultural needs of the poor. A letter signed by 150 AP-based organizations was sent to the authors of the Human Development Report to inform them about the *Prajateerpu* process and the jury's verdict prior to the release of the report on 10 July 2001. At the London press launch of the Human Development Report both campaigners and journalists referred to the *Prajateerpu* verdict as an example of how UNDP might bring the voices of people in poor countries into its influential Human Development Reports in future.

Press coverage in the UK and elsewhere raised questions about DFID's bilateral support to the government of AP and the use of taxpayers money. As a result, the UK's then minister, Clare Short, responded to questions asked in the press and, later, by members of parliament in the House of Commons.⁷ Development NGOs such as Christian Aid and the Intermediate Technology Development Group, along with campaign groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth and other global justice initiatives, brought DFID's role in AP into sharp focus and asked that aid be redirected to support the citizens' jury's vision of the future rather than Vision 2020.^{8,9}

Following the controversy in the wake of the *Prajateerpu* report, the executive directors of the two UK institutions that employed us (International Institute for Environment and Development – IIED and Institute for Development Studies – IDS) established an e-forum. From the outset the e-forum run by IIED-IDS asked participants to address narrowly framed questions that focused on research methods and validity.¹⁰ Comments on substantive issues such as human rights and rural livelihoods, for example, were not invited by the e-forum organizers.

Despite its shortcomings, the e-forum on *Prajateerpu* and participatory processes for policy change did allow those with easy access to the internet to comment on the questions that had been raised. The criticisms posted on the *Prajateerpu* e-forum included suggestions that the *Prajateerpu* process had: misrepresented DFID's role and programmes in Andhra Pradesh; suffered from a lack of methodological rigour in the jury selection process; allowed bias in the three video presentations on the future of food and farming; not been 'objective' and lacked independence on the part of the authors of the *Prajateerpu* report and partner organizations. The more extreme critics described the *Prajateerpu* and its report as 'advocacy' and 'campaign' material, not 'research'.¹¹ However, there were also statements strongly supportive of *Prajateerpu* posted on the e-forum.

The quotes in Box 1 have been selected to give a flavour of some of the insights that were raised in relation to the issues addressed by this article.

One of the criticisms made by some social scientists was that, although they accepted that the University of Hyderabad's selection of members of the jury had been rigorous, it was not statistically random. The process of selection is detailed elsewhere (www.prajateerpu.org). We concur with John Gaventa's reply to such comments:

Selective sampling, as long as it is clear and transparent, is entirely legitimate, and, arguably far more valid than the random representation process, which ignores the social agency of the person from whom knowledge is being elicited, and which fails to involve the 'respondents' as active 'proponents' in using research findings. . . . If the concern of action research is not only knowledge generation, but also the generation of action and public awareness . . . then explicitly biasing the research towards those poor farmers who are more socially positioned to act is consistent with the methodology. Otherwise, such research is likely to be yet another extractive exercise which, in the name of 'neutrality' or 'objectivity', fails to benefit the poor. (Gaventa, 2003)

The most obvious missing element in the process – the lack of representation from two major foreign donors, DFID and the World Bank – was largely outside the organizers' control. As we have documented elsewhere, these institutional actors were contacted at an early stage of preparation for the hearings, yet chose not to take part.¹²

The donor agency whose policies had been specifically criticized in the *Prajateerpu* report was DFID-India. The head of DFID's operations in India officially complained to the UK institutes that supported *Prajateerpu* (IIED and IDS) condemning the authors of the report for misrepresenting DFID's programmes in AP, and the two institutions for allowing such a report to be published.¹³ The *Prajateerpu* process itself and its report was also criticized by DFID-India as containing 'gross misinformation' and 'unfounded criticism'.

Following DFID's intervention in May 2002, the director of IDS decided to have the *Prajateerpu* report removed from the IDS bookshop and from IDS's online mail order service.¹⁴ An article on *Prajateerpu* and the use of citizens' juries in developing countries that had been published in an international journal (Pimbert, Wakeford & Satheesh, 2001) was also removed from the IDS website, and an initial decision to place the report on the IDS website was reversed. The *Prajateerpu* report remained posted on the IIED web site – despite DFID-India pressure and a written request to censor the report.¹⁵

On 26 June 2002, the then directors of IDS (Keith Bezanson) and IIED (Nigel Cross) placed a disclaimer on all electronic copies of the *Prajateerpu* report and on the opening page of the IIED-IDS e-forum.¹⁶ Following consultation with IIED and with Indian co-inquirers this disclaimer was removed from the electronic version of the *Prajateerpu* report on the IIED website in December 2002.

Box 1 Comments from the e-forum**Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend**

. . . once again all the burden of the proof is put on the shoulders of the ones who are working for participatory, empowering processes. Other, much more relevant and obvious questions should be added to [those posed by the e-forum moderators], such as:

- How to make sure that the powerful do not always come up on top by using their phenomenal capacity to 'create' public opinions through all sort of direct and subliminal means?
- How to make sure that opinions are indeed informed and 'intelligent' – coming from the full comprehension of the choices, alternatives and consequences?
- What have we learned from the historical experience of populist movements all over the globe?
- If indeed the less privileged in society have the least capacity to receive information and make their voices heard, how can a movement of solidarity help them?
- What should we think of government agencies that attempt to silence criticism from the very poor they are supposed to serve?

John Gaventa

If the jurors in this case had reached a differing conclusion, more favourable to the dominant development plans and processes of the state and international donors, would the concerns we have heard about rigour and evidence still have been raised? Or, if those representing the marginal farmers had done so, would these concerns have drawn such international attention? One wonders . . .

Andy Stirling

The crucial issue seems . . . to concern the need to be reflexive over the role of power in academic discussions over issues of 'representation', 'evidence', 'engagement' and 'accountability'. Of course, such reflexivity should be an explicit feature of any particular exercise – and *Prajateerpu* (along with many others, including some that I have been associated with) may be subject to criticism on this count. But this same consideration also highlights a particularly challenging responsibility of leadership in academic institutions.

Carine Pionetti

[I was] a silent observer of the *Prajateerpu* [hearings]. 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.

All things considered, maybe it is not such a bewildering turn of event 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 recognizing the legitimacy of a constructive critique addressed to them and engaging in dialogue – may well emerge.

continues

Box 1 Comments from the e-forum (cont.)**Robert Chambers**

Many others might want to join me in an appeal to policy-makers and others to listen, reflect and act on what the jurors concluded. There is so much there that otherwise would have been so little heard. Further, there is the pioneering of the methodology and the prominent recognition it has received. May many others be inspired to conduct and take part in consultations of this sort. May these increasingly level the playing fields of power, and inform and improve policy and practice. And may they enable many more of those who are poor and excluded to gain for themselves the better lives which are their right.

Source: e-forum on *Prajateerpu* and participatory processes for policy change. See www.iied.org/sarl/e_forum/ and PLA Notes 46 (2003)

However, the disclaimer remained on the *Prajateerpu* report in all IDS outlets (electronic versions and printed copies sold in the IDS bookshop).¹⁷

DFID did not fund the *Prajateerpu* and declined invitations to take part in the event – either as a specialist witness or oversight panel member (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2002b). However, DFID was inevitably a powerful actor because three organizations involved in the co-inquiry process – GoAP, IDS and IIED – received significant funding from them, which is summarized below.

- GoAP: receives direct bilateral support that amounts to more than 60 percent of all of DFID’s aid to India (DFID, 2000, 2001). Along with the World Bank, DFID is the major external support agency to the GoAP. Working with the World Bank it supports a programme of structural adjustment for poverty elimination in AP and funds interrelated and mutually supportive elements of the GoAP’s Vision 2020. The four main pillars of DFID’s budgetary support to the GoAP are identified as: power sector reform and restructuring; fiscal reform; governance reform; and rural development/agricultural reform. Both DFID and the World Bank work closely to help the GoAP refocus its spending priorities and divest functions and services where this is more appropriate. Specific support efforts are made to strengthen the GoAP’s capacity to manage the privatization programme outlined in Vision 2020 (DFID, 2001; see also www.andhrapradesh.com).
- IDS & IIED: DFID’s annual contribution to IDS was between 60 and 70 percent between 2000 and 2002. In comparison IIED received an average of about 18 percent of the total budget in 2000–2002. However, some of IIED’s major programmes depend on DFID for 50 to 55 percent of their funds.

We suggest that the aggressive reaction of DFID-India is an example of a more widespread failure among bureaucracies to fully internalize the principles of participation in analysis, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This also provides further evidence for Greenwood's observation that, for leaders and administrators of public funds, action research which brings together diverse actors for the purpose of bringing about emancipatory social change often 'unsettles local routines and structures while not providing the typical-sounding research outputs that are delivered into the hands of those in charge' (Greenwood, 2002, p. 129).

Without effective mechanisms for accountability, these influential actors and their organizations not only undertake and fund processes that do not live up to their claim to be participatory, but fail even to recognize that their supposedly participatory initiatives have mostly been superficial consultative exercises. Such consultation exercises successfully convince senior technocrats that they have taken public opinion on board, yet do not reflect the realities seen on the ground. We concur with Hildyard, (2001, p. 70), who observed a DFID-India project being implemented during the late 1990s, and commented:

Perhaps the first thing that agencies serious about participation and pluralism might take is not to reach for the latest handbook on participatory techniques, but put their own house in order: to consider how their internal hierarchies, training techniques and office cultures discourage receptivity, flexibility, patience, open-mindedness, non-defensiveness, humour, curiosity and respect for the opinions of others.

Though various initiatives are underway to integrate participatory processes into large organizations more successfully (see Pimbert, Bainbridge, Foerster, Pasteur, Pratt, and Yaschine Arroyo, 2000), this dominant institutional orientation identified by Hildyard remains perhaps the single greatest impediment to the implementation of democratic practices such as *Prajateerpu*.

Part B: Reflections and implications

Equalizing knowledge–power relations

In the organization of *Prajateerpu*, the co-inquirers attempted to implement a power-equalizing approach to action research by reversing many of the dominant polarities in policy processes. We suggest that particularly successful reversals from normal roles and locations included:

- putting the perceptions, priorities and judgement of ordinary farmers centre stage;
- holding the process in a rural setting on a farm – the location most likely to put small farmers at ease;

- encouraging government bureaucrats, scientists and other specialist witnesses to travel to farmers to present evidence on the pros and cons of new technologies and policies;
- using television and video technology to ensure transparency and free circulation of information on the process and the outcomes and;
- using appropriate power-equalizing democratic practices – in this case a combination of scenario workshops and citizens' jury methods.

On another level we benefited from a transnational community of inquiry that spanned different national cultures, organizational constraints and professional norms. When the findings of *Prajateerpu* became controversial, the opportunities for reflection and response afforded by this network of co-inquirers was tremendous.¹⁸ For a time, specific coalitions of power succeeded in devaluing and, in one of the institutes involved, suppressing the *Prajateerpu* report. However, an essentially closed positivist verification system was opened up by voices of democratic inquiry from the community that emerged in the wake of *Prajateerpu*. Active engagement by citizens and researchers reaffirmed the legitimacy and relevance of the *Prajateerpu* process and the ensuing report, as these actors decided for themselves what counts as valid experience and knowledge. The dispute has subsided and the *Prajateerpu* report has become widely distributed and widely quoted by researchers not only at IIED and IDS, but more importantly among Indian government and non-government institutions.

One of our aims was to enable our Indian co-inquirers and marginalized communities represented by the jury to increase their ability to influence decisions on the future of rural development in AP. While it is too soon to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of *Prajateerpu*, the Telegu version of the report that was launched in February 2003 is being taken up as an advocacy tool across the state.

The evidence available suggests that since the launch of *both* the *Prajateerpu* report in the UK and the Telegu version in Hyderabad, the capital of AP, a wide community of co-operative inquiry has emerged. Intermediary individuals and channels have begun to form to act between the jury and those with the power to create change. They currently include:

- an AP-based coalition of organizations, and individuals involved in *Prajateerpu*, which co-ordinates efforts to influence policy makers in India;
- facilitating further processes of deliberation by small and marginal farmers within their own communities, linking basic literacy programmes to an analysis of power and exploring paths to empowerment (for examples see case studies listed in www.reflect-action.org);
- *Prajateerpu* facilitation workshops organized by the AP Coalition for the Defence for Diversity in November 2002. Participants learnt about the methodologies used and issues of quality control. They, and other groups from AP who had been co-inquirers in the process, have made plans to run

- regional *Prajateerpu*-like events in 2004, aiming to generate more detailed and site-specific policy scenarios for different regions of AP; and
- efforts to develop multi-stakeholder learning groups that link people in Andhra Pradesh with those working internationally to promote constructive dialogue between marginalized peoples, scientists and policy makers on the choice of food and farming futures. The Asian Social Forum held in Hyderabad (AP) in January 2003 highlighted the broader relevance of the *Prajateerpu* process and explored ways of enhancing its policy influence in a variety of settings.

Reflections as action researchers

Perhaps the most powerful lesson *Prajateerpu* taught us as action researchers is the value of safe spaces within action research processes. Each of those included in the concentric circles of Figure 1 had access to a space where dialogue could take place and misunderstandings resolved. This was particularly important for the core group of co-inquirers who came under great pressure during the height of the controversy during the period of May–September 2002. During this time the authors (MP and TW) were forced to question the actions that our superiors had taken in respect to what we regarded as the censorship of *Prajateerpu* and a dismissive attitude towards the results of a legitimate action research process that we had developed with our Indian co-inquirers. Without the safe space we had created within our core group we would have been in danger of both becoming isolated and losing our links to the legitimate demands from those who represent people who are being denied their basic human rights.

Despite initial attempts by one of us (TW) to build a space for the discussion of the issues raised by *Prajateerpu* among his colleagues at IDS, this was prevented during July–August 2002 by an order from his institute's director that effectively prohibited him from communicating with his colleagues at the institute. This also created an atmosphere of repression that made it difficult for TW's fellow researchers at IDS to come to a view of why the *Prajateerpu* report had been condemned and censored by the director of IDS. At IIED, MP's discussions with his colleagues eventually led to a constructive exchange of perspectives, culminating in a meeting between the then director of IIED and the Indian co-inquirers in February 2003. This crucial meeting was held in Hyderabad (AP) in the presence of an IIED Board member and some of the jurors involved in the *Prajateerpu* process. The dialogue addressed all contested issues and achieved an important mutual understanding that allowed collaboration between IIED and the Indian partners to continue.¹⁹

Conclusions: Breaking hegemonies of knowledge and power

At the end of our original *Prajateerpu* report we quoted from a condemnation of India's technocrats and their abuse of their dual grip on state knowledge/power by Arundhati Roy:

The ethnic 'otherness' of their victims takes some of the pressure off [India's] nation builders. It's like having an expense account. Someone else pays the bills. People from another country. Another world. India's poorest people are subsidising the lifestyles of her richest . . . It's time to spill a few state secrets. To puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian state. Carelessness cannot account for 50 million disappeared people. Let's not delude ourselves. There is method here, precise, relentless and 100% man-made. (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2002a, p. 54)

Like most ex-colonies, India has inherited an administrative system dominated by an elite of scientists, planners and bureaucrats whose contact with the poor is minimal (Prakash, 1999; Vishvanathan, 1997). Partly because of the still-pervasive caste system that disadvantages untouchables (Dalits), indigenous peoples (Adivasis) and the poor, the civil servants' perceptions of India's most excluded often seem narrow in their understandings, even compared to former colonial rulers. The grip of technocrats on the instruments of knowledge creation and political power, as described by Roy in the quotation above, is only weakly checked by processes of democratic accountability. The studies carried out by AR Vasavi point to a diverse and self-reinforcing range of detrimental impacts of Green Revolution technologies largely caused by those whose supposed duty was to ensure that they benefited all India's farmers (Vasavi, 1999a, 1999b). The *Prajateerpu* jurors discovered and exposed the extent to which India's most marginalized groups can hold some foreign donors jointly responsible with their own government for the continuing lack of accountability in policy making that these organizations claim to be pro-poor.

Most of the social and environmental research in India, carried out by both national and foreign researchers, culminates solely in the publication of the research findings rather than giving research subjects any greater voice in decision making. This conventional 'trickle down' research approach contrasts with the action research approach taken here in that *Prajateerpu* at least made an attempt to increase the accountability of those in power, rather return to pre-participatory modes of inquiry.

Some commentators despair of participatory initiatives, believing that they will always be captured by elites and end up 'ventriloquising' the supposed voices of the poor (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Yet we believe that our response to this outcome should be to improve the mechanisms that can assure the deliberative competence and credibility of participatory processes.

The transnational forces that are creating a greater concentration of power

away from communities and towards corporations are countered by initiatives such as *Prajateerpu* that bring the local reality of poor and marginalized people to global prominence. We believe that it is both necessary and possible to use action research to create more legitimate initiatives that strive to make global institutions accountable to citizens, particularly those representing communities who have traditionally been excluded from decision making. But despite some notable exceptions (e.g. Borrini–Feyerabend, Pimbert, Taghi Farvar, Kothari and Renard, in press; Fricke, 2003; Gustavsen, Hofmaier, Philips, Anders and Anders, 1996), it is also true that action research approaches to large-scale or macro-structural problems such as globalization are scarce (see Greenwood, 2002). To realize the full potential of these approaches, new transnational communities of inquiry should be established. We hope the *Prajateerpu* process and its aftermath can provide lessons so that others can build and improve on the attempt at power-equalizing action research described here.

Notes

- 1 Project carried out while at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK.
- 2 Michel Pimbert and Tom Wakeford are joint and equal co-authors of this article. We would also like to acknowledge the vital contribution of our co-inquirers – particularly the core group of individuals from the three Indian organizations detailed in the text.
- 3 Full details of the *Prajateerpu* process can be found in Pimbert and Wakeford, 2002a, 2002b, 2003.
- 4 In Telegu *Prajateerpu* means ‘the people’s verdict’. Telegu is the official language of the State of Andhra Pradesh.
- 5 For a discussion of some of the shortcomings in the *Prajateerpu* process see in particular pages 36, 40, 42 and 45 in Pimbert and Wakeford, 2002a.
- 6 News reports are archived at www.prajateerpu.org
- 7 Archived at www.prajateerpu.org
- 8 Press release issued by these three named organizations, along with the Small and Family Farm Alliance on 18 March 2002.
- 9 A press release was issued by four NGOs, which is archived at www.prajateerpu.org
- 10 See: www.iied.org/sarl/e_forum/authors.html, last accessed 1 October 2003.
- 11 See comments by Bezanson and Sagasti and from DFID-India on www.iied.org/sarl/e_forum, last accessed 3 October 2003.
- 12 Correspondence with DFID and World Bank is currently being archived at www.prajateerpu.org
- 13 Letter by Robert Graham-Harrison, Director of DFID-India to directors of IIED and IDS, 3 May 2002.
- 14 See www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/index.html, last accessed 1 October 2003.
- 15 Letter by Robert Graham-Harrison, Director of DFID-India, to the Director of IIED, 24 June 2002. See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2134336.stm>,

- last accessed at 1 October 2003. Both archived at www.prajateerpu.org
- 16 See http://www.iied.org/sarl/e_forum/directors.html, last accessed at 1 October 2003.
- 17 In December 2003, while this article was at the proof stage, the disclaimer was removed from the IDS website, restoring open access to the report after a gap of 18 months.
- 18 See www.prajateerpu.org
- 19 Video records and a full transcript of the Hyderabad dialogue on *Prajateerpu* are available from IIED (email: info@iied.org) and the convener of the APCDD (email: ddshyd@hd1.vsnl.net.in).

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Dr Tom Wakeford is a biologist and action researcher based at the University of Newcastle, UK, where he is a research fellow working on deliberative democratic processes – particularly those related to science, technology and innovation policy. *Address:* Policy Ethics and Life Sciences Institute (PEALS), Bioscience Centre, University of Newcastle, Times Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4EP, UK. [*Email:* tom.wakeford@ncl.ac.uk]

Dr Michel Pimbert is an agricultural ecologist by training and is currently Principal Associate at the International Institute for Environment and Development, UK. His work centres on participatory action research, sustainable food and farming systems, as well as the political ecology of biodiversity, rights and culture. *Address:* International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 3 Endsleigh Street, London, WC1H ODD, UK. [*Email:* michel.pimbert@iied.org]