

POWER-REVERSALS IN BIOTECHNOLOGY: 13

EXPERIMENTS IN DEMOCRATISATION



DEMOCRATISING BIOTECHNOLOGY

A global consensus among policy-makers about the need to improve the livelihoods of the world's poorest and promote legitimate institutions of democratic governance has brought controversies over the development of genetically modified crops into sharp focus. GM varieties are claimed to have the potential to be part of packages that could lift millions out of hunger and poverty. The reality, however, is that to date they have largely been developed or introduced with little regard for the views or priorities of the farmers whose livelihoods they are meant to improve.

Democratising biotechnology

Over the past decade, enthusiasm for biotechnology as the answer to food crises and agricultural productivity dilemmas has coincided with a growing disillusionment among development practitioners about the quality of participatory tools being used in rural development projects. Participation has lost its edge in the same way that 'sustainability' – once a radical concept critiquing mainstream economics – has become a bland term meaning everything to everyone. From World Bank projects to numerous NGO programmes, many now argue that much participatory practice fails to address the more deep-seated causes of poverty. Participation must respond to power and powerlessness, and new approaches are urgently needed which allow real engagement in policy deliberations by marginalised communities.

The following case study of *Prajateerpu*, a process of participatory action-research convened by a group of Indian and UK-based organisations during 2001, serves to illustrate some of these tensions, as well as providing a practical example of an attempt to democratise biotechnology.

Case study: *Prajateerpu* and Vision 2020

Developed together with the World Bank and the management consultancy firm McKinseys, Vision 2020 sets out the future of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh as imagined by its governing elite – a future in which poverty is

WHAT IS A CITIZENS' JURY?

Citizens' juries are one of a range of action-research tools that can make a powerful contribution to social justice and the legitimisation of non-specialist knowledge.

Like a legal jury, the cornerstone of a citizens' jury is the belief that, once a small sample of a population have heard the evidence, their subsequent deliberations can fairly represent the conscience and perspectives of the wider community. This age-old reasoning contrasts with today's most common quantitative and qualitative methods for representing the public's views – the opinion poll and focus group.

In most citizens' juries a panel of non-specialists meets for a total of 30 to 50 hours to examine carefully an issue of public significance. The jury, made up of between 12 and 20 people, serves as a microcosm of the public. Under the model of the citizens' jury most commonly used in the UK and US, jurors are often recruited via a more or less randomised selection of people taken from the electoral roll. To encourage recruitment from as broad a range of backgrounds as possible, various provisions can be used including an honorarium payment, crèche facilities, or convenient jury timings and locations.

Jurors hear from a variety of specialist witnesses and should be able to discuss as broad or narrow a range of issues as they see fit. The function of participants in a citizens' jury is different from many other methods of qualitative research or deliberative democracy for the following reasons:

- jurors are given time to reflect and deliberate freely with each other on the questions at hand, occasionally assisted by a neutral advisor.
- they are given the opportunity to scrutinise the information they receive from witnesses, whom they interrogate themselves.
- they are expected to develop a set of conclusions or 'vision' for the future – which need not be unanimous.

‘Citizens’ juries can make a powerful contribution to social justice and the legitimisation of non-specialist knowledge’

In a world of deep inequalities the need to move away from purely instrumental participation to the generation of opportunities for excluded groups to articulate their needs and ideas is more urgent than ever

totally eradicated and the use of GM crops has become widespread. Vision 2020 seeks to transform all areas of social and economic life in the state. The government's poverty-reduction strategy is intimately linked with the delivery of this comprehensive vision.

Fundamental and profound transformations of the food and farming system are proposed in Vision 2020. Yet, by 2001 when *Prajateerpu* took place, there had been little or no involvement of small-farmers and rural people in shaping this policy scenario. Local and state-level partners, including – in internally circulated documents – the UK Department for International Development, expressed considerable concerns about the possible impacts of Vision 2020 on livelihood security, agricultural biodiversity and the very fabric of local food systems and economies.

Extensive discussions between a range of organisations in India and the UK led to the formation of a core team that carried out what has subsequently become known as the *Prajateerpu* process.

While examining three broad scenarios for food and farming futures, the process provided an opportunity for a comprehensive participatory assessment of GM crops. *Prajateerpu* included the adaptation of a citizens' jury, which was overseen by a panel that included a retired chief judge from the Indian Supreme Court, a senior official from a donor agency and a number of local NGOs. A four-day hearing process allowed a jury of 19 mostly Dalit or indigenous farmers to cross-question 13 witnesses. These included biotechnology companies, state government officials and development experts. Rather than presenting the jury with the task of accepting or rejecting GM in the abstract, the jurors were able to build their own scenario for sustainable and equitable agriculture, into which they could insert elements of the future scenarios to which witnesses had referred.

Sharing power with the poor

Recently, the World Bank has launched a global debate on the role of GM crops in addressing malnutrition. Will this allow the world's poorest a genuine voice in shaping their futures? Many doubt it. With transnational companies so tied into the industrialisation and mechanisation of agriculture, it is unlikely that institutions of

global governance – often committed to public-private partnerships – will facilitate critical voices through genuine deliberative processes. Despite these constraints, many civil society organisations are pushing to create new spaces through global campaigning techniques and popular education. As part of this movement, citizens' juries, where they are linked to widespread societal debate and mobilisation, could become powerful triggers for democratic change. The verdict of the *Prajateerpu* jury demonstrated that even a comparatively top-down participation process can enable marginalised communities to critique dominant visions of their future, such as GM technology, and begin to develop their own alternatives.

In a world of deep inequalities the need to move away from purely instrumental participation of excluded groups to the generation of opportunities for them to articulate their needs and ideas for a more equitable future is more urgent than ever (see Briefing 12). Policy-makers dealing with GM crops need to concede some of their power and engage in new participatory action-research practices. These processes need to be under diverse control and framed sufficiently openly to generate insights and demands that potentially challenge preconceived ideas of what constitutes development.

This briefing was written by Tom Wakeford, Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Research Institute, University of Newcastle (www.peals.ncl.ac.uk) and Michel Pimbert, International Institute of Environment and Development, London (www.iied.org). It draws on papers 32, 39, 40 and 42 (see publications list). These are available at: www.ids.ac.uk/biotech

Prajateerpu involved: the Andhra Pradesh Coalition in Defence of Diversity (APCDD), The University of Hyderabad, AP, the All-India National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), and the UK based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

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Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.
Tel: +44 (0) 1273 606261
Fax: +44 (0) 1273 621202/691647