



## Creating Spaces for Engagement: Understanding Research and Social Change

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# Creating Spaces for Engagement: Understanding Research and Social Change<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

There are growing expectations within development that research should inform policy. Bilateral government aid agencies are charged with meeting the Millennium Development Goals and other targets, and spending on research is justified on the basis that it can directly contribute to these objectives: ‘Appropriate policies, tailored to national and international conditions and effectively delivered, depend on knowledge’(DFID 2001).

Partly as a result of these expectations, there has been considerable effort to pin down how research can best impact on policy. Based on the review of 50 case studies of how research has influenced policy, Julius Court and John Young conclude that it ‘is imperative to establish a reputation for providing high-quality policy advice, based on long-term credible policy research. It is also necessary to provide evidence-based solutions to the current policy problems when policymakers are looking for them, and then provide them in the right packaging’ (Court and Young 2003: 19).<sup>2</sup>

Given this growing emphasis on the links between research and policy, it is crucial to examine how these connections occur. This report draws on the experiences over six years of an international research network – the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (Citizenship DRC)<sup>3</sup> – involving over 40 researchers working in 12 countries.

1. Thanks to Carlos Cortez, Lyla Mehta, Ranjita Mohanty, Andrea Cornwall, Oga Steve Abah, John Gaventa and Lucila Newell for the discussions that helped to lead to this report. Thanks also to John Gaventa, Lawrence Haddad and Alison Dunn for their comments on earlier versions. All remaining shortcomings are of my making.

2. Perhaps not surprisingly, there has been some recent attention on the tendency for ‘faking it’ and claiming influence on policy where there is none that can be clearly identified (Stone *et al.* 2001, Carden 2004).

3. For more information on the Citizenship DRC, see [www.drc-citizenship.org](http://www.drc-citizenship.org)

### Central questions about influence and DRC research

- **How have Citizenship DRC researchers engaged with different actors, and for what purposes?**
- **How has Citizenship DRC research been used? For example, has it created new spaces for discussing certain issues? Has it influenced or enabled existing processes? Has it linked actors or processes in new ways?**
- **Who is using Citizenship DRC research? Are communities or participants in the research using it? Are DRC researchers using it in other activities? Are other actors using DRC research?**
- **How do the means through which the research is communicated affect the types of influence it has? For example, is research communicated through informal interactions or policy spaces?**
- **How can the Citizenship DRC approach to influence be improved?**



**A seminar to launch the book *Inclusive Citizenship* by Naila Kabeer, attended by Clare Short.**

This report will explain how Citizenship DRC researchers have defined influence in terms of their work, who they have engaged with and how, in order to trace the process of creating spaces to engage with stakeholders in order to communicate the research results.

What emerges from this analysis is that research processes are highly political, affecting both the researched and the researchers themselves, in different ways. As a result, both researchers and those who participate in research become political actors in the policy and practice. The next section outlines some of the existing literature around understanding the impact of research on policy in order to highlight how the work of the Citizenship DRC makes a distinct contribution.

## 2. Understanding the impact of research

There is a significant body of literature on how to measure and assess the impact of research on policy (Carden 2005, Court and Young 2004, etc.). If there is any consensus in the literature on the impact of research on policy, it is that it is difficult to measure. This is for a variety of reasons, including particular conceptual challenges (Carden 2004). As a result, most of the existing literature on the policy impact of research focuses on the policy side of the equation. In particular there is a focus on:

- a taxonomy of the effects of research on policy (Walter *et al.* 2003), where policy influence generally is used to mean affecting government policy that relates directly to poverty reduction<sup>4</sup>
- dissecting the policy context (Crewe and Young 2002, Scott 2003)
- creating models to explain how policy is made (Stone *et al.* 2001).

In addition to the literature that tries to clarify how policy processes work and the types of effects that research can have on policy, there are also a series of models that try to link an understanding of how policy is made with the ways that research can influence policy.

### Models of how policy is made and how research can influence policy

- Variations on the ‘rational model’ of policy as problem-solving with research as clear evidence to provide solutions (Stone *et al.* 2001)
- ‘Policy entrepreneurship’, which relies on a psychological analysis of types of individuals likely to influence policy (Gladwell 2002)
- ‘Knowledge utilisation’, such as knowledge creep where ideas gradually influence the policy environment (Weiss 1977), or research as part of a constant information stream that can influence policy environments (RAWOO 2001)
- ‘Innovations systems’, where the success of research in having impact is ‘driven by continuous interactions between “supply drivers” and “demand drivers”’ (Surr *et al.* 2002)
- ‘Policy paradigms’, where research is used to change ‘the overarching framework of ideas that structures policymaking in a particular field’ (Hall 1993: 59)<sup>5</sup>
- ‘Actor-network theories’, where the policy process is constituted through the politics of the interaction between actors and networks (Keeley and Scoones 1999).

4. An important exception is the major IDRC study on research and the policy process, that divides policy influence into three broad categories: enhancing policy capacities, broadening horizons, and effecting policy regimes (Carden 2005).

5. This draws on the categorisation in Stone *et al.* 2001. For an alternate categorisation, see Carden 2004.

Undoubtedly these models are an important step towards linking research and policy. They offer some explanations to help researchers see through the fog of competing trends and interests to find the chink in the armour of the policy machine where appropriately packaged research results can really make a difference. There is a clear need for researchers to understand policy processes and communicate research results in an effective way in order to influence these processes. However, the models assume that the politics of influencing policy occur largely within the policy process itself, or in how researchers interact with policymakers.



**Community theatre in Nigeria to explore citizenship issues.**

But this is not the only way in which research can have influence. Research can also engage a range of stakeholders, including the ‘researched’, who in turn emerge as actors in generating and using knowledge, and in influencing the policy process. Both approaches were used within the Citizenship DRC. This report will focus on the second – on how research has created spaces for engagement with different stakeholders and how the research has been used within these spaces. Instead of focusing on the policy process, here the focus is on the research process: how researchers are political actors with their own agendas, what purposes researchers assign to research, what kinds of changes they want to achieve, and how underlying factors influenced the spaces for engagement with others as part of the research process.

This report does not set out to measure the impact of Citizenship DRC research on policy, but rather to understand the processes of how research is related to social change from the perspective of DRC researchers.<sup>6</sup> This requires disaggregating ‘policymakers’ by looking at specific cases of engagement with different types of actors. It also involves understanding researchers themselves as actors with political agendas involved in different types of research processes, which are themselves political. In some cases, this has included working directly with local, national, or international government officials. In other cases, researchers have engaged more closely with community-based organisations (CBOs), processes of mobilisation at the local and regional levels, and also with other academics or researchers.

6. Assessing the impact of Citizenship DRC research would be a more complex and resource-intensive undertaking, which would require research participants and others to help define the parameters for measuring impact. This study is limited in that only a selection of DRC researchers were interviewed. Because of this, the focus is more on what we can learn from how researchers in the DRC see research connected to influence, and less on how that influence can be quantified or measured.

### 3. Background on the Citizenship DRC

From 2001 to 2005, an international network of around 40 researchers and practitioners based at seven partner institutions completed more than 60 research projects. The partners were:

**Institute of Development Studies** (University of Sussex, UK) – IDS

**Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies** (Bangladesh) – BIDS

**Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento** (Brazil) – CEBRAP

**Society for Participatory Research in Asia** (India) – PRIA

**Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Xochimilco** (Mexico)  
– UNAM, UAM-X

**Theatre for Development Centre** (Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria) – TFDC

**Centre for Southern African Studies/School of Government** (University of the Western Cape, South Africa) – UWC

The research projects covered a wide range of topics within research frameworks set by the researchers from the network – from citizen participation in health policy in Brazil, to garment workers' rights in Bangladesh, to accountability and oil in Nigeria. A central principal of the Citizenship DRC has been to create the opportunities for the researchers in the network to agree on a research framework and carry out collective analysis of the research findings. Because the Citizenship DRC involves different types of organisations, including research institutes, universities and NGOs, the researchers themselves have brought a variety of perspectives on what the research should focus on, and on what the research should achieve. Nonetheless, across the Citizenship DRC there has been a general commitment to make research have an impact on policy and practice. Because the Citizenship DRC includes partner organisations with their own networks and linkages at national and local levels, the approach to influence has attempted to build on these.

In the same way that the research agenda was set through iterative processes involving all the researchers in the network, the existing networks of the DRC partners informed the approach to policy. In Bangladesh, this meant that researchers produced pamphlets in Bangla for garment workers about their rights for distribution to a local NGO, at the same time that they wrote chapters for an academic book. The Citizenship DRC has aimed to make its research relevant and of use at the local and national levels to government, civil society organisations, the media and others. But there has also been considerable effort to draw out the lessons from this work for development policy and practice at the international level, by engaging with donor agencies and international NGOs. This has presented a certain contradiction within the Citizenship DRC: how can research be grounded in local contexts and have an impact at local and national levels, as well as speak to international policy

debates? The mechanisms for communication at the grassroots do not necessarily translate immediately into the means to communicate with donor agencies. Yet both levels (the grassroots, local level and the international policy level) are important in order to have an impact on policy and practice.

Following on from five years of work, the Citizenship DRC began a consolidated process of reflection and learning. Within this, a small group focused on drawing together learning about research methods and ethics, building an international research network, and examining the influence of Citizenship DRC research.<sup>7</sup> This group did not set out to measure the influence of Citizenship DRC research, but instead focused on understanding how research can be used to create opportunities for engaging groups and opening the possibility for dialogue. Citizenship DRC researchers mapped the ways that they had used their research, who they had engaged with and when, in order to better understand how researchers act to create spaces for engagement and how these can be linked to social change.

What emerged from this exercise was a complex and often contradictory set of experiences that challenge some of the underlying assumptions of the linear research-to-policy model. The contexts in which research is conducted are, without exception, complex and multidimensional, and research is inevitably only one among the many factors that can contribute to or inhibit change. There is a risk of over-attribution (i.e. to attribute many changes to the research) and a risk of over-ascription (i.e. to ascribe more importance to the research than to other factors in explaining change). It is vital to be tentative in terms of claiming changes as a result of research, and understand how research fits into wider processes of change.

An important theme that emerges from a closer examination of Citizenship DRC research is how the research process itself is political, both in terms of what questions and issues are researched and also in terms of how research is carried out. Researchers, rather than objective and independent actors, have their own political agendas and values, and these directly inform what kind of influence their research can have. The objectives and interests of researchers within the Citizenship DRC have not always been clear. Engagement with different actors throughout the research process has, in several cases, resulted in conflicts between researchers' agendas and those of the other actors they have been engaging.

Part of the process of reflection and learning was to explore the difficulties that researchers faced as a result of their shifting and multifaceted roles. In Mexico, for example, researchers reflected on the tensions between their roles as researcher, environmental activist and lobbyist. These different and, at times, competing roles led to tensions and dilemmas for researchers, where they were faced with difficult choices about the effects of their work. In South Africa, a researcher from UWC described how the local government took up research on the right to water after lobbying efforts by an NGO. When the local government responded to what the research showed to be a failure to uphold the right to water, it was through a private–public partnership that cut out citizen participation from the process. For this researcher, this was not the policy outcome that she had been hoping for – her own agenda in terms of the research was to increase the recognition of people's right to water, where

7. The methods synthesis group included researchers from PRIA, India; UAM-X, Mexico; TFDC, Nigeria, and IDS. For more on the ethics and methods of research, see Mehta 2007. For more on building an international research network, see Brown and Gaventa 2005.



residents of townships could participate in how the local government responded to their demands. If, in acting as a researcher on participation, citizenship and accountability, you generate expectations at the community level about changes that can be achieved that you are not able to actually deliver, what does that mean for the research itself?

## 4. Creating spaces for engagement: how has the Citizenship DRC approached influence?

If researchers are also political actors, with their own sets of interests and agendas, then the research process itself (in addition to what happens with research results when the research is finished) becomes an important space in which to examine how and when research has influence. Within the DRC there are different views about what research is, and different approaches as to how and what kind of influence research should have. The different views on research itself led to a range of types of research processes that have occurred over the past six years.

**Table 1**

View of research	Research as finding out	Research as activism	Research as developing theory
Type of influence expected	New or better evidence-based policy	Social mobilisation, increased awareness, positive social change	New/different discourses of development
Example from Citizenship DRC	Research on who participates in health councils, Brazil	Research on participatory sustainable watershed management in Mexico	Citizens and Science research group
Types of engagement	Training course for municipal government on how to respond to citizen participation	Formation of a watershed committee made up of representatives of indigenous communities and government agencies	Launch of book with Demos in London, and coverage in the <i>Lancet</i> on how citizens relate to science

### 4.1 Different meanings for research, different types of influence

How do these different views of research inform how influence in relation to research can be understood? The views about what research is (and therefore what kind of influence you should expect it to have) are not mutually exclusive. It is also possible to see research as having multiple purposes, cutting across creating evidence, building awareness and shifting theory. The extent to which researchers emphasise the different purposes for their research directly informs the types of influence they expect the research to have and how they go about achieving that influence.



Carlos Robles and Luisa Paré – DRC researchers working with a local NGO in Veracruz, Mexico.

Where research is understood to be about collecting information that can provide specific evidence about an issue, then there is a case for that evidence being used to inform particular policy. For example, CEBRAP research shows that the process of recruiting committee members has been limiting the representation of poor and marginalised people in the health councils in São Paulo. At trainings with local government officials in charge of structuring the councils at the municipal level, this information was important to inform those officials about a concrete change that they could make that would contribute to more representative participation in the councils (see section below on engagement with local government). In this case, the research process involved identifying questions and then gathering the information to answer them. The result of this was evidence that could form the basis for informing municipal policy on how to recruit members of health councils.

If research is understood as a process of engaging with communities and CBOs to identify and discuss issues and generate knowledge that can help people change their own situations, the types of influence that the research could have will be different. In Mexico, researchers paired their work on community mobilisation around participatory watershed management with research on accountability. The focus of their efforts has been on establishing a participatory watershed committee at the local level that can help indigenous groups present their perspectives to the government institutions that control the bio-reserve where they live. Although these researchers also engaged with the state and local government, as well as other researchers in Mexico working on environmental issues, the process of facilitating the creation of the watershed committee was the most important kind of influence that they believe the research can or should have. In this case, as with the work of TFDC in Nigeria, PRIA in India, and UAM-X in Mexico, it is counterproductive to

8. Here the intention is not to separate theory and practice into a false dichotomy. Research that challenges discourses can be based on action research and vice versa. The issue is what the primary focus of the research process is and how that relates to the kind of influence that research can have.

separate ‘influence’ from the process of research itself. It is the research process, based on interactions with particular groups and communities in order to generate knowledge together, that has influence. It is also possible to use the research results from this kind of research to create wider policy messages, but the primary focus is not to create evidence to inform policy.

Another type of research process used in the DRC is to challenge particular discourses within development. This means the research process brings together different theoretical perspectives in order to shape new ideas and concepts. The object of this type of research is not to generate evidence to inform policy, and it is not necessarily to engage with processes of social change at the local level.<sup>8</sup> Andrea Cornwall’s work on spaces for change has contributed to discussions at an international level about participation and democracy. The conceptual framework she developed (see Cornwall 2002), was in turn used to develop WaterAid policy on civil society involvement in policymaking. In a similar way, the work of the Citizens and Science group in the DRC created dialogue around issues of science in development that helped inform UK government policy through the International Select Committee.

#### 4.2 Different types of research, different types of knowledge

Within the literature on participatory research, there is an important emphasis on the types of knowledge that research produces (Park 2001, Park 1993). Although this was not a central focus of the research for this report, it is useful to highlight these different types of knowledge, and how they may be related to the types of influence that research can have. Building on Habermas’s critical theory (Habermas 1972), Table 2 shows Peter Park’s proposal for categorisation of types of knowledge (adapted from Park 1993).

**Table 2**

Type of knowledge	Instrumental	Interactive	Critical
<b>Definition</b>	Knowledge that explains causal relationships, structures, and functional relationships through the analysis of data	Knowledge that derives from how people interact with one another, including emotions, sharing daily experiences, and exchanging actions within a particular context	Knowledge that emerges from a combination of reflection and action that makes possible normative deliberations
<b>Relation to view of research</b>	Has a role in all three views of research, but central to ‘research as finding out’	Most relevant to research as activism	Clearly linked to research as activism, but also research as developing new theory

## 5. Who has engaged with Citizenship DRC research?

In the existing and substantial literature on research and policy impact (e.g. Stone *et al.* 2001, Carden 2005, Church 2005) there is a tendency to treat policy generically to mean the policies and programmes of governments at the local, national and international level. Yet increasingly in other literature there is the recognition that governance is about more than governments, and that policymaking involves broad networks and coalitions of actors. (See for instance DFID 2007, as well as a range of academic literature.) If this is the case, then it is important to explore how research involves and affects a broad range of actors, from local level activists, to representatives of donor agencies, to students learning about development.

In the Citizenship DRC, there is a wider view of influence of research in relation to a range of actors, including other academics, CBOs, government officials, and the researchers involved in the research themselves. In disaggregating ‘policymakers’ to look at the specific groups, organisations, and individuals that DRC researchers engaged with, the complexities of the research process in relation to social change emerge. This view of the relationship between research and social change emphasises dialogue and engagement with different actors rather than the transmission of information in an attempt to persuade policymakers to take different decisions (Figueroa *et al.* 2002).

This section explores how DRC researchers have engaged with different types of audiences and stakeholders through the research process. Researchers often engaged with a range of different types of audiences and stakeholders simultaneously – including other researchers, CBOs, local and national government officials, donor agencies, international NGOs, and the media. This section groups together examples of how researchers have engaged with different categories of stakeholders, and highlights what lessons can be drawn from this.

### Challenging corruption in Nigeria

**The TFDC distributed a policy brief on citizenship at the August 2005 National Conference on ‘Elections 2007: Protecting the Peoples’ Mandate’ organised by Global Rights, Nigeria. At this conference Atiku Abubakar, Vice-President of Nigeria, first openly criticised the government (including the President) for undermining democratic electoral processes:**

‘This, in turn, requires improving the integrity of our electoral process... I believe that democracy has become a universal core value that our society must uphold and consolidate. Responsible leadership in our society must, therefore, mean a deep commitment to and a strategy to deepen democracy by proactive measures that prevent democratic erosion or breakdown... One of the real tests of democracy is the acceptance by those in power that others who criticise them and are indeed trying to democratically take over their exalted positions are legitimate players in the system.’<sup>9</sup>

**The TFDC was able to insert DRC research findings into key events in Nigeria’s current national political debates by carefully targeting a specific and influential event.**

9. ‘Elections and the people’s mandate’, Keynote Address by Atiku Abubakar, GCON, Vice-President, Federal Republic of Nigeria, to the National Conference on ‘Elections 2007: Protecting the Peoples’ Mandate’, at the Yar’Adua Centre, Abuja, 25 August 2005.

## 5.1 Engagements with local, state and national government officials

Engagements with local, state and national government officials have shown researchers:

- What citizen participation means in practice for different levels of government
- How different levels of government respond to and understand participation (as a threat, an opportunity, a nuisance, etc.)
- What the main constraints are for government officials in responding to citizen participation.

### Government officials' views of citizen participation

In Brazil, CEBRAP organised training on citizen participation for local government officials in São Paulo, for the State assembly, and for federal level bureaucrats. What emerged through these trainings for very different groups of government officials was how they each saw participation. While the local level officials had a positive discourse about participation, when it came to implementing participatory mechanisms they saw participation as yet another demand on their already strained resources. For the federal level government officials, the questions that participation raised were about the role of participation in state reform. It is difficult to know how government officials will make use of the information discussed in these trainings. There are some indications that, at the city level, in São Paulo the recruitment of representatives for health councils has become more democratic, which was one of the recommendations of the training.

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### Increasing accountability in rainforest management in Chiapas, Mexico

Carlos Cortez was contracted by the state government of Chiapas to evaluate, over five years, the effectiveness of state programmes of rainforest management. The government was particularly interested in how to improve the relationship between civil society organisations and the indigenous population and the government, in a context of low-intensity warfare and social exclusion. Cortez was able to integrate ideas about citizenship, participation and accountability into the evaluation as key concepts for assessing how successful government programmes have been. While over the past five years there have not been major improvements in all of these areas, there has been a marked improvement in accountability and transparency in the way that government programmes in Chiapas are managed. Advances over the past five years have also depended on the fact that the state government administration has been concerned with improving relationships with indigenous people, more generally, in a very difficult and conflict-ridden situation.

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## 5.2 Engagements with CBOs and NGOs

Several Citizenship DRC partners have had ongoing engagement with CBOs and local NGOs as part of the research process. These engagements are crucial to participatory action research that is aimed at social change. But they have also thrown up some tensions and dilemmas for researchers. The key points that emerged from these engagements include:

- Working with CBOs and NGOs increases the influence of the research at the local level by linking the research to ongoing processes of social mobilisation and social change
- Maintaining a close relationship with these actors has also meant compromises by the researchers
- The levels of expectation in communities can be very high when research has an explicit action orientation. These expectations can undermine the ability of the researchers to carry out the research. They can also create ethical dilemmas for researchers when they are unable to meet the expectations of community members
- Researchers and local NGOs can have different political interests in terms of how research results should be used and what changes should happen
- Research that contributes to processes of social mobilisation is necessarily fragile, and shifts in the political environment can easily undermine advances.

## The social costs of oil: action research in the Niger Delta

**In the Delta, the levels of exclusion are extreme, especially in comparison to the revenues generated by oil extraction. The situation has become increasingly violent, in part because of armed militia groups, often youth groups funded by oil companies. When the TFDC team began to work with community organisations to design an action research process, they arrived one day to find that the community groups refused to do further work with them unless they were paid more money. Despite agreeing to work with the TFDC, they wanted to be paid the same amount that the oil companies pay for their ‘expenses of participation’. In the end, the TFDC was able to keep to the original agreement, but following the research there were a lot of questions raised by the community groups about how they would follow up on the problems of corruption and lack of accountability identified through the research. In the Niger Delta, the presence of the oil companies has perverted social interactions and the political system to such a degree that it was difficult for the researchers to establish that they were different to the oil companies and the government.**

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Community researchers learning how to use video in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria.

## Realising the right to water in South Africa

UWC research on the right to water in Cape Town has involved working closely with the national NGO, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG). The UWC team, led by Lisa Thompson, produced a video on access to water in the townships, which they showed to EMG to discuss how it could be used to affect the city's water policies. EMG immediately raised questions about how the community and CBOs would benefit from the research and suggested that the UWC researchers show the video in the village halls in the township in order to create more discussion about the right to water at the community level. Engagement with EMG gave Thompson different perspectives on their research and how it can be used. But it also raised questions about the implications of working with NGOs:

'An important issue to consider in research is the relationship with NGOs – sometimes the different agendas can jostle. NGOs like EMG are thinking about how research will feed into policy debates – but sometimes the NGOs have very specific agendas for advocacy that don't fit with the research agenda. If we, as researchers, have our own policy agenda, how does that fit with that of the NGO's? ... There is an assumption that a network of researchers and practitioners will lead to adding up and synergy, but there can also be disagreements about funding, research directions, etc. And this raises questions about the positionality of the researchers. There are major consequences from this over the long term for what you can achieve with the research.' (Interview with Lisa Thompson on 12 October 2005)

## Building participatory watershed management in Mexico

For some of the researchers in Mexico, the main purpose of their research was to contribute directly to a process of social mobilisation that would give rural indigenous groups the ability to demand the transparent and sustainable management of the watershed where they live:

‘A watershed committee has now been set up, which is a direct result of the DRC research. The purpose of the committee and of the research has been to facilitate a process where the people themselves can demand accountability, and to give them the tools to do this more effectively. The research has always been in close contact with the people in the communities, but now this is even stronger.’ (Interview with Luisa Paré and Carlos Robles on 23 September 2005)

At the same time, this ongoing engagement with CBOs has led to a series of tensions. Representatives on the committee from different parts of the reserve area have different agendas, including political motivations. The researchers have their own agenda – promoting the environmental sustainability of the watershed, which is at times at odds with members of the community who are focused on livelihoods options.

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### 5.3 Engagements with donors

Researchers from the Citizenship DRC have engaged with donors in a range of settings, using a broad spectrum of communication forms over the past five years. The intensity of this engagement increased, especially in the last year, as more synthesised findings emerged, and researchers in the Citizenship DRC were able to take advantage of relationships with particular individuals within donor agencies that have been built over time. The pattern of engagement with donor agencies, especially Social Development and Governance Advisers in DFID, alternated between workshops and face-to-face meetings, distributing publications, and informal relationships between individual researchers and representatives of donor agencies. Combining different forms of engagement, we believe, helped to build momentum over time behind the ‘citizenship agenda’, though obviously there were many other forces at play as well. By 2006 there was a significant change in discourse around the role of citizenship in governance and development from when the DRC began in 2000. For instance, during a speech in the UK at Demos in October 2006, Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development said ‘democracy is the best way for citizens to claim their rights’ and that ‘democracy requires participation’. The DFID paper, *Governance, Development and Democratic Politics* (2007), quotes directly from a Citizenship DRC publication: ‘An effective state both depends upon and supports an empowered citizenry, promoting, realising and protecting human rights and enabling its citizens to become active members of their communities’ (page 31).

At a later international DFID Social Development Advisers retreat in 2006, advisers were considering the details of how a citizenship approach can be used in practice. It is important to be very cautious about the attribution of influence, since the production of a White Paper or a speech by the Secretary



of International Development is complex. However, through ongoing engagement, certain trends can emerge in different ways in formal policy formulation. For example, the language around citizenship could have an important impact in the future: 'People may start saying "empowered citizens" now, and in a couple of years it could have a big impact. If that language gets into policy, it will be the result of a whole range of different communication approaches' (interview with Alison Dunn on 12 July 2006).

Lessons that have emerged from these engagements include:

- It is important to get 'the right people together in the right circumstances so that there is a preparedness to engage with new ideas' (interview with Rosalind Eyben). The opportunity for discussion is as important as the actual content of the research findings themselves. If people do not feel that there is a 'safe space' for discussion, it will be unlikely to be effective
- The timing of communication activities is crucial, for example if there is an existing process where policy is going to be changed or formulated formally (as with a White Paper), efforts at communication can be more effective if they relate directly to these processes
- Representatives of donor agencies are more likely to engage with a printed publication through a meeting or other event, which gives that publication importance
- It is unclear how much influence the way that information is presented (i.e. qualitative versus quantitative, printed versus visual) has on the eventual impact of research, in comparison with the political environment within organisations
- It is important to draw on allies from other organisations to have greater collective influence on the donor agenda, for example by bringing together like-minded people from different aid agencies, international NGOs and research institutions. This provides more support for individuals who may have difficulty in influencing their own organisations without outside support
- Within donor agencies there are already certain people who are sympathetic to this agenda, but the Citizenship DRC can play a role in helping to bring these people together so that they can create their own networks for support and solidarity.



Women living in urban slums in Mexico blocking a highway in protest against lack of basic services.

## Engaging with Social Development Advisers at DFID

Researchers from the Citizenship DRC have engaged with representatives from a range of international donor agencies. The most sustained and intense engagement has been with DFID Social Development Advisers (SDAs) and other DFID staff. Direct engagements with SDAs have included:

- Workshop on rights and power with 25 representatives of donor agencies, November 2003
- Reading week on citizenship and participation for SDAs
- Series of presentations at SDA retreat (including drama by TFDC researchers, presentations by IDS researchers, and publications display), November 2005
- Submission of text relevant to White Paper on governance
- Discussion in preparation of policy paper, *Building Effective States: Taking a Citizen's Perspective*
- Dissemination of DRC newsletter to SDAs (ongoing)
- Workshop to discuss implications of the results of Citizenship DRC research for aid, July 2006
- At least two seminars on specific country-based research held at DFID seminars.

## 5.4 Engagements with international NGOs

Engaging with international NGOs through DRC research has been important because it has helped to:

- further develop concepts through interaction with different perspectives and experiences
- highlight the risks of research concepts being used as a checklist instead of contributing to deeper understanding
- shape the future research agenda for the DRC itself. One of the three main themes for the current round of research on global citizen engagements has been reinforced by the discussions with international NGOs about economic literacy and the importance of advocacy on this issue at the global level.

### Drawing a power cube: perspectives from international NGOs

John Gaventa, through work with the DRC and the Participation, Power and Social Change programme at IDS has developed a framework for understanding power in terms of different dimensions, spaces and places. This framework has provided the basis for engagement with international NGOs on several different occasions:

- By CARE India to analyse how power affects sex workers in India
- As part of a discussion including a range of trade union and international economic rights activists for a workshop on Citizen Action, Knowledge and Global Economic Power at IDS
- As the basis for an evaluation project, ‘Assessing Civil Society Participation as Supported In-Country by Cordaid, Hivos, Novib and Plan Netherlands 1999–2004’,<sup>10</sup> when research teams in Colombia, Guatemala, Uganda, Sri Lanka and Guinea used this ‘power cube’ approach within their field work as a core element of the evaluation.

In each of these cases, the engagement with international NGOs has helped to develop and evolve the framework by bringing insights from the field into interaction with the conceptual elements of the framework. For example, the Colombian and Guatemalan cases expanded the categorisation of how spaces are created by different types of organisations and processes (including spaces created by formal rights, and transitory spaces created by protests) within a context of rising levels of violence (Gaventa 2005). But engaging with international NGOs around the framework of the power cube also exposed a risk in using the framework in a static way: ‘The danger of the “matrix” or “cube” approach is that these boxes become used as static categories, or become a checklist of strategies of methods to be applied uncritically in different settings. In the field, when it was presented simply as a cube, “there was an immediate tendency to want to fill in the boxes.”’ (Gaventa 2005: 12)

10. Coordinated by Irene Guijt of Learning by Design. See Guijt 2005.

## 5.5 Engagements with other researchers

Engaging with other researchers nationally or internationally was another important element of the research process. These engagements were not just around the research findings, but also about research methods and communication. These engagements helped to:

- create a network of people in India at universities interested in developing and teaching participatory research methodologies that are linked to social change
- challenge what counts as legitimate research, especially where there are different disciplinary and methodological approaches.

## Teaching participatory research methods in India

In India, PRIA has been working to influence the way that research methods are taught at universities across India. Ranjita Mohanty has organised a survey of higher education institutions in India, which shows that around 30 universities are currently teaching some form of participatory research methods. Of these, only three offer fully fledged participatory methodological training. On the basis of the survey, PRIA convened a series of workshops with people from the universities who are involved with teaching participatory methods. At the workshops, Mohanty was able to provide examples of PRIA research, including Citizenship DRC research, to illustrate how action research can contribute to methodological developments. Through the workshops it became clear that academics would like to have more participatory tools for researching specific themes (e.g. livelihoods, health, nutrition, etc.), and that those already teaching participatory methods had been encountering a number of ethical questions. Overall, the main obstacles to enhancing the curriculum for teaching participatory methods are the artificial dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods within the university system, and the lack of political will within the administrative and bureaucratic systems to implement curriculum reform. But by using a discussion about methods as the entry point, 'we were able to talk about using participatory research as a means to access different levels of reality, and how research is linked to social transformation – which transcends using research only as a method of data collection' (interview with Ranjita Mohanty on 15 September 2005).

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Poster in Dhaka to promote the work of the National Garment Workers' Federation.

## Using video for research with garment workers in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, a researcher experimented with a video about garment workers' rights as a way of communicating research results. She and her team filmed the story of a garment worker, following her life in Dhaka working in a factory back to her village in rural Bangladesh. They also interviewed representatives of the Labour Department, the garment workers and garment employers' associations and trade unions. This video was important because it helped create awareness about the range of different stakeholders involved in the garment sector (see section below). The major obstacle to this work was the resistance of other researchers at BIDS. They did not necessarily see the video as a legitimate output of the research, and were very critical about its production when it was shown at BIDS. The challenge for the DRC researcher was to convince the researchers at BIDS, who are more accustomed to 'policy workshops' with national government officials from particular ministries, that the video was an effective way to communicate research.

## 6. Key lessons about research and influence

### Politics and the risks of action-based research

**In Sabzuro, Nigeria, where TFDC had worked with the Youth Progressive Association, one of the results was to be an exchange visit to Belize in the Caribbean. The aim of the visit was to allow the members of the association to learn better ways of organising cooperative business from counterparts in Belize. The village hierarchy saw this as an opportunity to invite a businessman on the trip to make business contacts. Although the visit has not been made, it has created an undercurrent of mutual suspicion between the village authorities and the youth association.**

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Some key learning for DRC researchers has emerged from experiences over the past five years of trying to use research to influence policy and to contribute to social change.

First, there are significant risks involved in trying to use research for social change. Action-orientated research can generate expectations at the community level that researchers themselves are not able to fulfil. As DRC researcher Luisa Paré said: ‘When there is an empowerment process, people can think you are behind it, even if all you did was help to facilitate it.’ There is also the risk that research can be used for different and contradictory purposes, as the case of the privatisation of water in Cape Town shows. One of the key issues for the Citizenship DRC is how to address the expectations that communities involved in the research have as a result of the research process.

Another risk is one for researchers themselves. Research that links to social change inevitably challenges existing power structures, and there is a real risk for researchers that if they challenge the agencies which fund their work they will lose their funding or lose their autonomy. So there is a risk that researchers themselves become disillusioned with the research process and its prospects for achieving significant change. This is not to suggest that research should shy away from trying to have influence. But the experience of the Citizenship DRC points to the importance of recognising the trade-offs and risks that may be involved.

The experience of the DRC shows how using research for change often involves the need to reconcile diverging interests. The divergence of interests has been at all levels, from researchers and their host institutions through to village stakeholders and government. For example, in Mexico, researchers were often caught between the agenda of environmentalists who wanted to conserve the rainforest, and the indigenous communities who were endeavouring to improve their livelihoods. While these agendas are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it often fell to them as researchers and activists concerned with both the environment and improving livelihoods, to try and bridge the gap. In Brazil, a researcher described the challenges of reconciling the negative perspectives of social movements on participation with the research results, which showed the positive possibilities for participation. In Bangladesh, the process of communicating research on garment workers’ rights required increasing the awareness of different stakeholders.

While using research for influence has risks, it has led not only to changes in policy in some cases, but also to changes in researchers' perspectives. For example, through working on the evaluation of the state of Chiapas' programmes, a researcher in Mexico realised that his work in the future must include working with government to improve their capacity to respond to participation. In Brazil, interaction with government at the local, state and national levels showed how there are different perspectives on participation at each level. In Bangladesh, a researcher learned about how the priorities of garment workers differ from what researchers and trade unions think should be important. Where researchers had assumed that the right to collective action and safety standards would be the primary concerns, the garment workers themselves were much more focused on ensuring that they were paid regularly and on time. In South Africa, a researcher described how engaging with NGOs has highlighted the difference between her position as a researcher and the agenda of the NGO. Conducting action research has also been a learning experience at a very personal level for many in the DRC. As a Nigerian researcher describes it: 'In doing research of this sort, especially at the grassroots level, there is a definite humbling experience that results, where your own knowledge and privilege are challenged.'

Finally, experience in the DRC has shed some light on the relationship between research and influence more broadly. Research in the DRC is policy-orientated research in the sense that the overall aim is to influence policy and practice, broadly defined. The type of influence that the research can have is informed by the way that researchers define research itself. Those more focused on research as activism engaged with people on a local level, and must confront the contradictions and complexities of that context in order to have any influence. Those with more of a focus on generating evidence to inform policy engaged with local and national government officials, and learned more about the constraints and possibilities on policy decisions in the process.

## Influence at the local level in Nigeria

**In Giwa, Nigeria, the youth association started a village newspaper after TFDC's engagement with them. It began as a simple two-page bulletin of information about village events, but now discusses community development issues and has become a rallying point for community action. In Sabzuro, the research gave new impetus to the youth association to reorganise the cooperative association and to demand better prices for their ginger.**

One of the key concerns therefore has been how to make different kinds of policymakers (including CBOs, NGOs, local and national governments, donor agencies, and international NGOs) hear about the findings from the research and to factor them into specific policies and practice. This has implications for how the research information is packaged. In many cases the same research has been packaged into different formats in order to communicate different messages to specific audiences. A key challenge for the Citizenship DRC was how to link research findings from different types of research. For example, how can findings from participatory action research using theatre in the Niger

Delta best be communicated to DFID's Social Development Advisers? And how will the engagements at a local level and at an international level lead to change – for donors, CBOs, and for the researchers themselves? The spaces for engagement that research processes created with different stakeholders and audiences provides some important lessons about what are the most likely pathways of influence.

As the examples in this report show, the pathways of influence at the local level can be more visible – but they have also been highly politicised. This raises a whole series of challenges for how researchers act within the research process. Engagements with a range of different groups generated insights into how each of these types of engagements has implications for the type of research that is carried out, and the expectations about how that research will have any influence.

Future work should focus on how to enhance mechanisms for iterative learning, where existing experiences of engaging with different actors through the research process can feed back into discussions that lead to new approaches to linking research and social change. This may require looking beyond the different actors already engaged in the research process to see how the network can be expanded to increase the pathways to influence. It is also necessary to understand more fully the implications of how different approaches to research (such as those set out in Table 1) lead to different types of engagement and influence, and how these are connected to one another. This involves questioning the final intent of the research: what will be the outputs and outcomes of the research and who benefits.



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