

## Prajateerpu at the Earth Summit

The World Conservation Union, the world's oldest and largest global conservation body (formerly IUCN), is highlighting the Prajateerpu controversy in one of its contributions to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Policy Matters, the magazine of their Commission on Environmental Economic and Social Policy (volume 10 - [www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/](http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/)), has published an article by M. Pimbert, T. Wakeford and P.V. Satheesh entitled: "Citizen visions of sustainable development—Lessons from deliberative democracy in South India". The magazine is to be launched this week at the Johannesburg meeting.

The Editors, Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend and Taghi Farvar, have written an editorial that is reproduced below.

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### THIS REPORT IS UPSETTING POWER!

As we were going to press we heard news of a heated controversy developing around the Prajateerpu report. The Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex at Brighton decided to withdraw the report from its website and bookshop and the Directors of IDS and IIED—the institutions that employ Tom Wakeford and Michel Pimbert—were under great pressure to "disown" their work. All this is the result of political pressure from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)—the development assistance agency that provides substantial support to the government of Andhra Pradesh, and over 70% of the funding for IDS and IIED. In recent months, the head of DFID India, Robert Graham-Harrison, accused Michel and Tom of "gross misrepresentation of our programme in the document" which he called "unfounded criticism" that was "deeply unhelpful" and wrote to the IIED executive director asking to remove the Prajateerpu report from their Internet site. The report remains on the IIED site (and for this we commend IIED), but it was since removed from the IDS site, and the directors of both institutions are making efforts to distance themselves from the publication. Michel and Tom replied on 12 July with a nine-page defence of their report as something that gave "a bigger voice to poor and marginalised communities." They told Mr Graham-Harrison that he had sparked off debate "about independent research and academic freedom in the face of attempts from a few individuals within a major donor agency to silence critical reflections."

As independent observers with long-standing respect for the two UK institutions involved in the Prajateerpu controversy, we have been watching with disbelief their bending under pressures from a government agency. The two institutions should be very glad, in fact, that some information about these pressures has reached the public, and especially the Indian partners—providing the saving grace for them by not letting them fall prey to official censorship behind the scene.

The low point was reached, in our opinion, when the institutions began talking about "addressing concerns related to different approaches to action-research, the adequacy and inclusiveness of research evaluations..."—and put on their websites a rather uncouth disclaimer for the publication. The disclaimer casts doubts over the validity of the report methodology, which is tantamount to subtracting political weight from the verdict of the poor. Besides being amused at this rather futile and counterproductive attempt, we have a major problem with the fact that the "burden of proof" keeps being put on the shoulders of the ones who are working for participatory, empowering processes. Indeed, "the burden of proof" should be more justly born by those research or development agencies that back social engineering with huge financial resources or by conventional academia and their "mainstream" methods, which threaten dispossessed people with their eternal rehash of data games, combining utmost precision with abysmal relevance and meaning. In fact, we would maintain that today's most respectable research institutions have much better things to do

than splitting hair on methodologies. These institutions should rather address some of the most relevant and ominous questions of today, questions that go to the heart of what "public opinion" and even democracy ultimately are in a system of skewed power relationships that includes control over most means of information.

How can we make sure that the powerful do not always come up on top by using their phenomenal capacity to "create" public opinion through all sorts of direct and subliminal means? How can we make sure that public opinion is informed and intelligent-coming from a full comprehension of choices, alternatives and consequences? What have we learned from the historical experience of populist movements all over the globe? What are we learning from the current struggle for the domination of the media by political forces? 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? And, last but not least, what are we to think of government agencies that attempt to silence criticism from the very poor they are supposed to serve? We hope that some of these questions will begin to be addressed by the electronic forum that IIED and IDS have now started on the stimulus of the controversy ([www.iied.org/agri/e\\_forum](http://www.iied.org/agri/e_forum)). We also hope that development assistance agencies will soon learn that the public nature of the funds they control binds them to not only respect any criticism leveled to them, but to encourage the expression of the views of the dispossessed, which is exactly what the Prajateerpu process has done.

It is the nature of people with intelligence and integrity to be upsetting power, in all days and ages and circumstances. Michel and Tom and their Indian colleagues may well not be new to this and we applaud them all the more. To them, and to all who participated in the Prajateerpu process, we offer our strong support, solidarity and deepest respect.

-The Editors (Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend and Taghi Farvar)