

Policy brief

Strengthening Voices of the Marginalised People: Lessons from Participatory, Evaluation and Reflective Learning (PERL) Workshops

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Introduction

In a global environment where economic growth and development can be attributed to well-functioning National Systems of Innovation (NSI) (Freeman, 2002), linking marginalized communities with the NSI, and strengthening their voices, is an important policy imperative. The marginalised are those people who are confined to the lower or peripheral edge of the society. Such groups, who often include the poor, women and youth, are very often not involved in the mainstream economic, political, cultural and social activities.

There has been a growing body of literature focusing on grassroots innovation (Cozzens and Sutz, 2012; Fressoli et al., 2014; Gupta, 2016) and inclusive innovation (Heeks et al., 2014, Santiago, 2014). This literature emphasizes the importance of not only producing innovations that benefit the disenfranchised or marginalised communities, but the participation of these marginalised in the innovation processes. This requires consideration of the poor as beyond users, but as generators of innovations. Linking the marginalised with STI processes will thus entail institutional changes, and especially those types of institutional changes which, further to stimulating a high rate of innovation, also facilitate inclusion at different stages of the innovation process (Heeks et al., 2014).

Public participation has been routinised in South Africa, and its importance has been stressed in virtually all key government policy documents. As espoused in the Constitution, outlined in the White Paper on Local Government (DCOGTA, 1998), and

entrenched in the National Development Plan (Vision 2030) (NPC, 2012), communities are to actively participate and form an important part of the local government in South Africa. More recently, the Back to Basics Approach (DCOGTA, 2016) reiterates the importance of putting people first, assisting municipalities in developing community engagement plans. At local government levels, community participation is seen as an integral part of inclusion. For instance, the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process is meant to arrive at decisions, through public participation, on issues such as municipal budgets, land management, promotion of local economic development and institutional transformation in a consultative, systematic and strategic manner. Basically, the IDP process is about the municipality identifying its priority issues/problems, which determine its vision, objectives and strategies followed by the identification of projects to address the issues, in consultation with the communities.

In principle, South Africa's public participation processes allow citizens to exert significant influence over policies and interventions- expressing their voice. However, a number of issues weaken the citizen voice and limit the levels and depth of participation. One of the major challenges is that public participation is often confined to consultations, including in preparing Integrated Development Plans, intended to be a main instrument for participatory development planning and budgeting at municipal level (World Bank, 2011). Even where the IDP public consultations occur, the IDP consultations often become simply an item to check off on the bureaucratic list. The bureaucratic practitioners very often consider public participation to be a time consuming process, which slows down implementation

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(World Bank, 2011). Similarly, the Motlanthe High level Panel report (2017) shows that participation activities at a local government are often seen as difficult to scale up to involve a wide range of stakeholders.

Additionally, knowledge of IDP processes is largely limited among the communities, especially among the marginalised, which hinders their participation (Marais et al., 2007). According to Marais et al (2007), the limited participation in the IDP processes is often due to a lack of public knowledge, not lack of public interest. As a result, the public participation has been limited mainly to special interest groups, especially the elites, with the necessary connections and resources to access these processes (World Bank, 2011). This elite capture has resulted in the voices of the marginalised being ignored, as the participation of the select few satisfies the policy requirement for public engagements.

This raises an important question on how to achieve the full participation of the marginalised groups, especially in poorly resourced districts, beyond just ticking boxes. The Rural Innovation Assessment Toolbox (RIAT) initiative has developed a Participatory Evaluation, Reflection and Learning (PERL) tool, which can strengthen government's participatory approaches. The PERL approach is based on the idea of empowering locals for reflective learning about their innovation and local economic development landscape. At the heart of the approach is the philosophy of *Participatory Development*, which is defined as, *a process through which stakeholders can influence and share control over development initiatives and over the decisions and resources that affect them* (World Bank, 1994: cited in Nelson and Wright: 1995). PERL workshops were held in 2017 across 8 Local Municipalities (LMs) with significant infrastructure backlogs and low levels of human development indicators; which are Bushbuckridge; Ga-Segonyana; Joe Morolong; King Sabata Dalindyebo; Mbombela; Mhlontlo; Ray Nkonyeni and Umuziwabantu local municipalities. This policy brief aims to highlight some lessons learnt from these sessions on how the marginalised can be empowered to participate in local development discourses.

Defining Participatory, Evaluation and Reflective Learning

The PERL tool is one of the three complementary tools in the RIAT toolbox. The PERL tool is aimed at creating local innovation platforms that bring together local actors to understand their innovation potential and develop visions for future innovation to enhance socio-economic development. Participants, who are drawn from a wide spectrum of local actors, especially targeting the marginalised groups such as women, youths and the poor, are required to provide localised definitions on what they consider to be innovation, and how they envision this innovation spearheading local development. Local municipalities, as local development champions, and local institutions of learning (e.g., universities), as knowledge producers, form the nucleus of these sessions.

While the technical definitions are provided during PERL sessions, the emphasis is on how the locals understand innovation, and how innovation, in their views, can be harnessed to stimulate Local Economic Development (LED). This encourages interactive learning, or learning from each other. To encourage maximum participation, PERL participants are divided into small working groups of 10-15 participants. Facilitation of the breakaway and plenary sessions are based on transformative or empowerment participation techniques (Fettermen, 1994). That is, the local actors are not just given an opportunity to participate, but are empowered to participate effectively, i.e. in a manner that ensures ownership of the process by all participants and their inclusion in decision-making. In the PERL approach, learning is predominantly an interactive process, which encourages knowledge co-production and co-learning - a process in which individual experiences and knowledge are shared and learning one from the other occurs, resulting in the collective emerging with lessons in order to forge appropriate ways for the collective to get ahead. The idea behind PERL workshops is to ensure the participation of different actors in the knowledge production process. Knowledge production

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is not only left to research institutions, but other local actors form a core driving team of the knowledge production and sharing process. This is because knowledge is a socially embedded process that cannot be understood without taking into consideration its institutional and cultural context (Lundvall, 2016).

to improve or strengthen the voices of marginalised groups by using a co-learning and co-production approach.

Insights from PERL workshops

- Substantial development gains stand to be achieved through empowering communities to actively participate in local conversations about their potential or capacities, and how sharing ideas about their potential can be harnessed to propel innovation-oriented LED;
- It is important to move beyond just creating opportunities for the marginalised to participate, but they should be empowered and capacitated to be able to identify, articulate and participate in local development priorities;
- A co-learning approach, as set out in the PERL engagement process, strengthens participants' competencies in terms of enabling skills development and transfers in problem solving and strengthening their confidence to engage;
- Universities can play a crucial role in integrating traditional knowledge and modern/scientific knowledge to create a synergy of new knowledge set that is contextually relevant and can be easily accessed by initiatives from within and outside the cluster. However, the process of embedding local universities within local communities is not automatic, but requires external coordination;
- The use of small group discussions provide a conducive platform for minority voices to be heard in decision making processes.
- The PERL approach is by no means perfect and does not solve all problems associated with the deficiencies in the participation the marginalised in municipal processes such as IDPs. However, it offers some lessons on how

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The government of South Africa is advocating for public participation in the attainment of development goals and objectives. The participation of the public in local government has always been central to government's development strategy. Inclusion of marginalized communities in innovation can happen through institutional arrangements which enable the marginalized to participate. The PERL workshop has demonstrated that participation based on interactive and co-learning ethos has substantial benefits for development. In order to ensure innovation leads to inclusive outcomes, the knowledge of the marginalized needs to be considered as valuable and their voices need to be included.

This policy brief makes these key policy recommendations:

- The possibilities of creating small groups (focus groups of about 10 - 15 participants) aimed at tackling specific issues should be explored. For instance, having ward IDP meetings which are focused on specific issues instead of a meeting which focuses on all aspects of the IDP;
- The participation process should have a clear and defined purpose. It should be clear whether the process is for informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering;
- A co-learning and interactive approach, which empowers and strengthens participants' abilities in terms of enabling skills development and transfers in problem solving and strengthening their confidence to engage, should be prioritised;
- Enable networking among people in the community through the establishment of

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working groups, local innovation platforms or committees assigned to various tasks.

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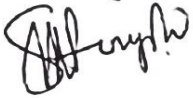
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