

3.1 Linking Community Participatory Research to Global Policymaking: Lessons Learned

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The past two decades saw a proliferation of opportunities for the perspectives of people experiencing poverty and marginalisation to input into global policymaking spaces. So far these efforts have been contested, with attempts to embed participatory methodologies facilitating only limited consultation and falling into many pitfalls. While *Participate* was built on learning from previous attempts to influence global policy, we aimed to further understand participatory processes, and advance practical mechanisms for participation at every level of decision-making, from local to national and global. *Participate* emphasises the interactions between these levels and the importance of impacting multiple levels in order to create lasting, transformative change.

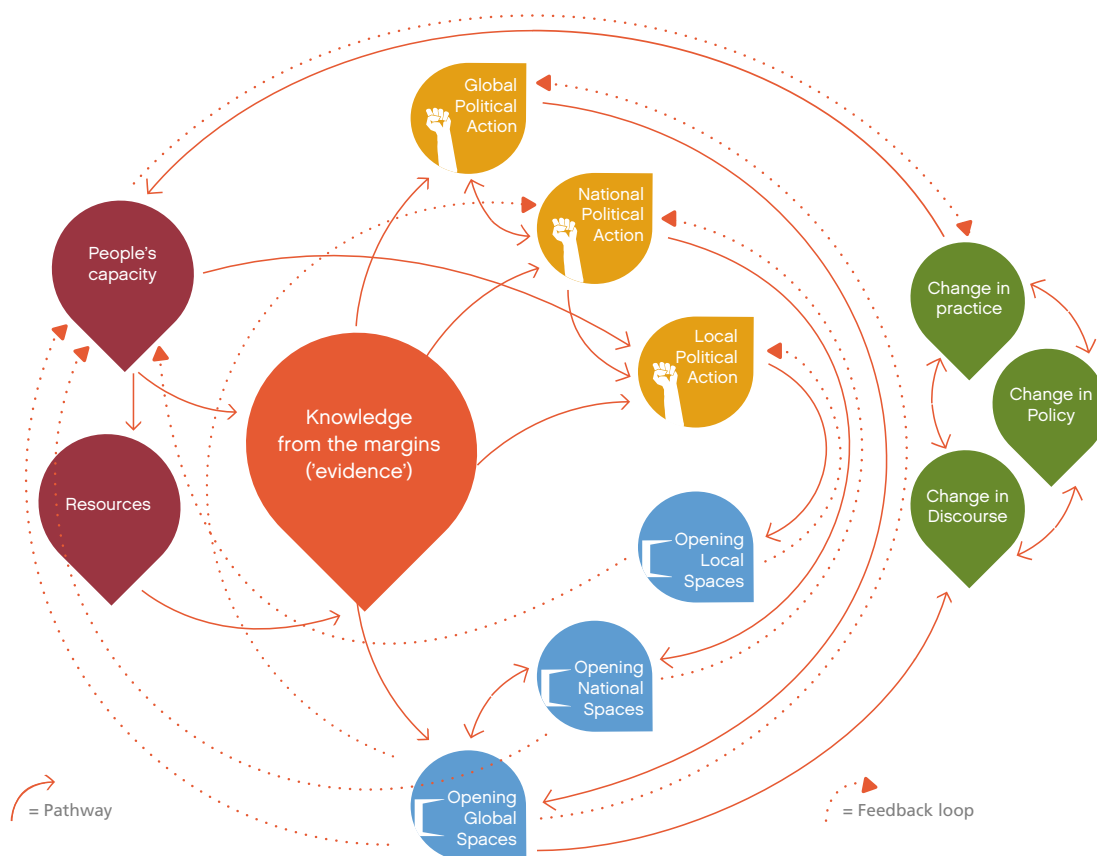
This chapter describes what has been learnt about bringing the voices on the ground into global policymaking. We examine how and by whom the

knowledge and evidence created were used, and the barriers and challenges to embedding this knowledge into global policy processes, through the following questions:

- What have been the challenges to embedding participatory processes into global policy spaces?
- What have these pathways of influence looked like, and what are some of the key lessons learned from these?

Pathways of participation in policy influencing

The knowledge generated through *Participate* was used at a variety of levels in different policy spaces, creating multiple policy-influencing pathways. The map on page 47 was developed by several members of *Participate's* Participatory Research Group (PRG)



Please note this diagram is an illustrative example of the pathways of policy-influence in *Participate* and is not exhaustive.

Diagram 1. System map: knowledge flows in the *Participate* policy influencing process

to illustrate some of the multiple pathways in which knowledge from participatory research was used to influence policy processes at local, national and global levels.

People's capacity

Central to the policy influencing process presented in the system map (diagram 1 above) is the capacity of people living in poverty and marginalisation to create knowledge as 'evidence' of their own issues, and to recognise the value of that knowledge through participatory research processes. The research methods and approaches that were used to generate this knowledge are discussed in other sections of this anthology.¹ Participatory research, such as Participatory Video (PV) and Digital Storytelling (DST), and in-depth participatory inquiry aims to enable local people living in poverty and marginalisation to do their own research for social change on their own terms.²

The participatory research methodology aspires to a proactive role for local people at every stage of the research. As well as designing the research, people living in poverty and marginalisation collected and interpreted the information. Through the research initiative, participants created their own space in the debate by engaging with their own community members as well as external stakeholders. For example, in Ghana, children identified lack of

knowledge around sexuality as a key driver of teenage pregnancy, and used video to present their findings to their peers and community in an attempt to change attitudes.³ Testimonies prepared by a group of sexual minorities in India using participatory video were shown to their own members during their Annual General Body meeting, as well as being displayed at the 'Work With Us' exhibition ⁴ at the United Nations (UN) headquarters to influence the global post-2015 debate.⁵ Where people in poverty and marginalisation generated evidence of their issues and priorities, they often felt increased ownership and were motivated to use this evidence to drive change at local and global levels.

Local, national or global action: opening spaces in local, national and global levels

The knowledge generated through these participatory processes can stimulate local, national or global political action, which can then be used to open and engage with local, national and global spaces of influence. At the local level, networks of people experiencing poverty and marginalisation involved in the research may make use of their new knowledge or 'evidence' to influence and build partnerships with local decision-makers:

¹ See Chapter 2 - Starting with people: Learning from participatory practice.

² For more information on the participatory methods used in *Participate* see the methods pages on our website (www.participate2015.org/methods/) and, pages 59-78 in the *Participate* global synthesis report 'Work with us' (www.participate2015.org/publications/work-with-us-how-people-and-organisations-can-catalyse-sustainable-change/).

³ For more information refer to *Participate* global synthesis report 'Work with us', section on Community social norms and discrimination on page 39.

⁴ For further insight into the *Participate* exhibition 'Work with us' see the reflection by Catherine Setchell in Contribution 2.2 Participatory Approaches and the Policy-Practice Interface.

⁵ Watch the full length version of 'Towards acceptance', a participatory video film made by transgender activists in Chennai, India with support from Praxis and Real Time (vimeo.com/74171698).

- Youth in Egypt used their research findings to engage their community and establish dialogue with local leaders and local authorities;
- People involved in the research in Nigeria participated in theatre forums to engage with local officials, community based organisations and women's organisations on the issue of increased transparency and accountability;
- In Mexico, research with indigenous people led to demands for changes in the health services on national level (medicines, equipment, and medical responsibilities), when these were initially made at the local level.
- CityMakers in Chennai and Delhi created evidence that was used by local campaigns to sensitise police and local stakeholders.

There are also examples of people living in poverty and marginalisation involved in the research talking directly to national and global policymakers, such as Betty Maina's visit to Mathare slum in relation to the participatory video process.⁶ People living in poverty and marginalisation involved in the research in Chennai participated in a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) webinar and presented their views to UN officials.⁷

While people experiencing poverty and marginalisation involved in the research were able to use the knowledge they generated to open local spaces, the *Participate* team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) synthesised the research findings of the 18 participatory studies⁸ and worked with individual stories of change in the lives of people living in poverty to open spaces and influence policy at the global level. For example, during the UN General Assembly in September 2013, an exhibition of people's stories 'Work with Us' was displayed in New York. Many spaces were created through the *Participate* IDS team efforts to build relationships with key actors throughout the UN High Level Panel (HLP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda,⁹ with the aim of influencing the HLP report to be more responsive to and inclusive of the voices and perspectives of people living in poverty.

However, the elite nature of these spaces where only 'expert voices' are heard, the need for legal identities and documentation such as passports and visas, the cost of travel, the jargon of the post-2015 policy debate, and the confidence necessary to speak in pressurised political public spaces, meant that it was difficult to meaningfully bring people who had first-hand experience of the reality of poverty and exclusion into these spaces. *Participate* was effective in navigating these spaces and building relationships with powerful actors to the extent that representatives from the initiative were sometimes able to access and influence 'closed'¹⁰ spaces as well as 'invited'¹¹ spaces (Gaventa 2006).¹² The Ground Level Panels (GLPs)¹³

were developed as a platform to bridge this gap and directly engage people with national and global actors. However, the ability to destabilise existing power structures remained elusive.¹⁴

Hydrology of policy in the post-2015 process

The systems map (diagram 1- page 47) shows that knowledge does not travel through linear pathways. Bringing research into policy influencing at multiple levels is a complex process; knowledge generated by people on the ground flows across different influencing levels, feeds into different spaces, leading to potential changes in discourse (and sometimes practice) and in policy that revert to affect the lived reality of people on the ground. But this is not a one way process: changing discourse can open new spaces and changes in practice can influence discourse. Local level changes can proliferate 'horizontally' to other communities; and likewise 'vertically' it can influence what happens at the national or global level.

¹⁴ This raises questions about who owns the 'relationships' with key decision-makers and about the legitimacy in representation of people in poverty and marginalisation: Who speaks once the debate has reached the higher echelons?

Contribution 3.3 explores issues of representation across levels and spaces in the post-2015 process.

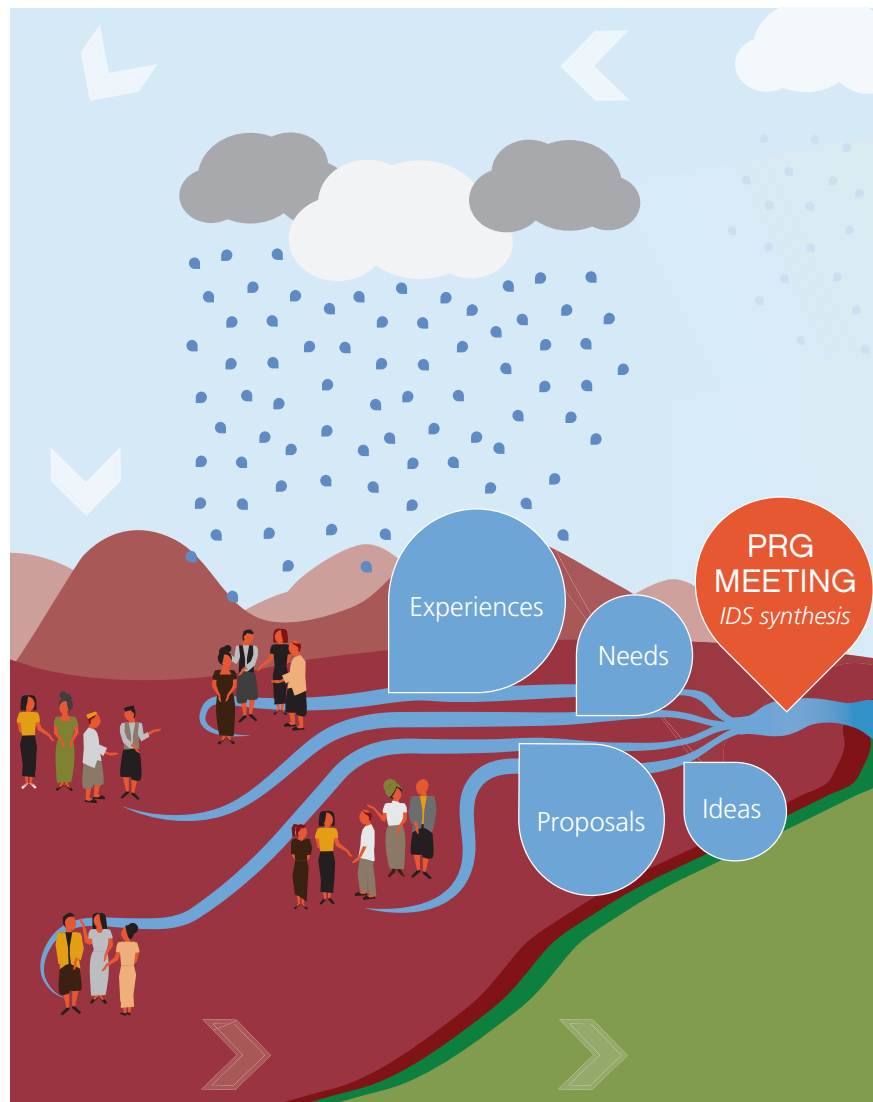


Diagram 2: The hydrology of policy

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW FULL DIAGRAM](#)

Carlos Cortez, PRG member representing Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico (UAM-X), described this as the 'hydrology of policy' in the post-2015 process (diagram 2 below):

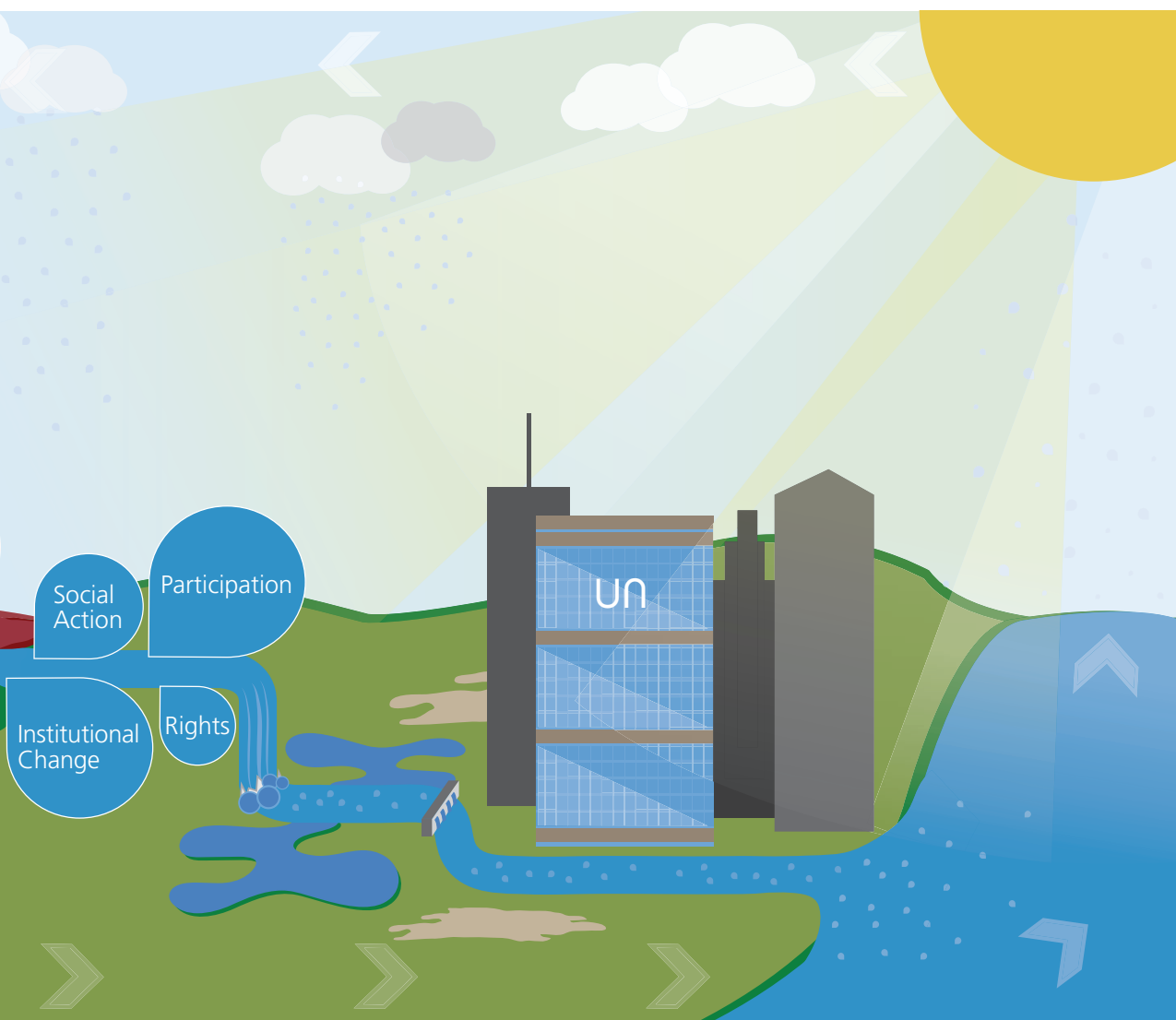
In the diagram, the ideas, needs, proposals for change and experiences from the poorest and most marginalised people are represented as the water that flows from springs in the local isolated places where they live into little streams. These streams of ideas, needs, proposals and experiences join to create rivers that feed the big river that represents the global debate on these post-2015 themes. Most of the decisions are taken in places where marginalised voices are hardly heard, because the springs are far away from where the big river joins the sea. From the diagram it is clear that the rivers go through a winding route, with obstacles such as dams along the way that limit and control the flow of the water. This represents the challenges faced while trying to bring the voices of the poor and marginalised to the place where the decisions are taken. Often they only reach after an 'evaporation' or synthesis process in which the voices of the poorest

and most marginalised on the change they want has almost disappeared and are little considered by the decision-makers.

The result of the global debate is represented in the diagram as clouds which present the general discourse and practice of 'development' from the perspective of the decision-makers. The clouds move towards land and arrive back at the source of the spring as a 'rain' of projects, programmes or simple promises from government and social actors. As in the real world, rain can be light, causing drought, or can be heavy, like a storm, in both cases not responsive to the poorest and marginalised.

Challenges in embedding participatory processes into global policy spaces

Engaging across different levels to achieve changes in development that prioritise the poorest and most marginalised people is not without challenges.



⁶ Betty Maina was a member of the UN High Level Panel (HLP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

⁷ Read Contribution 3.3 Representation across levels and spaces for further discussion on local, regional and global engagement between people living in poverty and decision-makers.

⁸ See the *Participate* global synthesis report 'Work with us' (www.participate2015.org/publications/work-with-us-how-people-and-organisations-can-catalyse-sustainable-change/).

⁹ Find out more information about the UN HLP Process here: www.post2015hlp.org

¹⁰ 'Closed' spaces are spaces in which decisions are made by actors behind closed doors with limited possibility for participation and consultation. Civil society often exerts efforts to opening up these spaces (see Gaventa 2006).

¹¹ 'Invited' spaces are often new spaces created by the efforts of civil society to widen participation. Through advocacy efforts, closed spaces "open", creating new spaces in which citizens or beneficiaries are invited to participate (see Gaventa 2006).

¹² Gaventa, J. (2006) 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis', *IDS Bulletin* 37.6, Brighton: IDS


¹³ Find out more about the Ground Level Panels on the *Participate* website (www.participate2015.org/ground-level-panels).



Community activists and local policymakers in Nairobi, Kenya meet within the local community to engage on the issues facing people with disabilities and their families

Feedback loops


Participate successfully aggregated the participatory research findings and highlighted individual and collective stories of people living in poverty to influence global policymaking. However, our experience is that the feedback loops from the global back to the local were not so effective. As Gaventa (2006: 28)¹⁴ identified ‘the challenge for action is not only to build participatory action at different levels, but how to promote the democratic and accountable vertical links across actors at each level’. Thus connecting not only local to global but also connecting global to local, the process has to focus on global AND local. Although many of the PRG members are working at the local level, they are not necessarily using the outcome of the global research synthesis and policy influencing to feedback into the participatory processes on the local level. Feedback of the outcome of the global research synthesis can contribute to validating the research outcome at the local level and inspire and strengthen calls for action.

Often findings from local research and action are used instrumentally as ‘evidence’ for global policy demands and because of that, local narratives take the form of sector specific outputs led by different international actors. *Participate* played a significant role in transcending the ‘territorial’ barriers of global civil society groups. However, a more effective approach would require a system that promotes community-led analysis at the global level (see section on GLPs below). Taking the global content back to the national level (and local level) to influence political action, and open national spaces for policy engagement has been much more of a challenge. So far decisions made at the global level have largely failed to translate to the national level, let alone the local level. 

Opening spaces on local, national and global level

At the global level, the UN system is complex and intimidating. Corridors of power in New York are elitist and exclusive. The UN-led post-2015 development process is centered on the decision-making of a small number of global elites based in New York. Often communication between decision-makers at the UN headquarters and those based in capitals is weak and sporadic, with those in country having little or no knowledge of the complex negotiations taking place – or even an awareness of the existing development framework of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

This is not to suggest that it is easy to access important actors at the local or national level, while those at the global level are on some remote plane. Far from it: for communities who have historically been excluded or marginalised, accessing local decision-makers can be complex and challenging, without the tools or resources needed to make their voices heard. It was only through the use of the Photo Voice approach on social media that street photographers in a South African township were able to raise awareness about the situation of the informal economy and open space on a local level to engage with the municipality. ¹⁵ Furthermore, the experiences of the PRG members indicate that accessing local power structures and political spaces has significant challenges that arise from vested interests within the community. In Bangladesh, on the national level there is space for engaging with disability rights issues, but at the local level this can prove very difficult.

 Questions such as “How can global level discourse trickle down to influence the national level?” and “How can we build the capacity of people to hold the global framework to account in their local settings” still need to be addressed. Critical here is the role played by political actors at the national level in bringing back global content to their countries.

¹⁴ Gaventa, J. (2006) ‘Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis’, *IDS Bulletin* 37.6, Brighton: IDS

¹⁵ For more information on this research process see the report (www.participate2015.org/publications/the-sustainable-livelihoods-foundation-research-report-photovoice-street-life-in-ivory-park/).

Short term immediate aspirations versus long term solutions

Working with people living in poverty to build a vision for global development poses challenges as their aspirations are often short term and immediate, while the post-2015 agenda is also concerned with longer term change and macro-level issues. This was particularly evident in the GLPs, where a diverse group of people from the margins drew on their own life experiences to provide a 'ground level' reality check to the HLP recommendations; as well as develop their own shared vision for development. The discussions of the GLPs often focused on immediate problems and everyday concerns: in Egypt ¹⁶ for example, discussion on the proposed global goal on securing sustainable energy focused on the immediate need for energy due to the political unrest in the country.

The GLP process raises questions around how to move from a localised, short term perspective to longer term, sustainable action that enables people living in poverty to engage with global processes and decisions that affect them on multiple levels. It opened space for participants' discussions to move from urgent needs to search for longer term solutions. This process led to a discussion on how to sustain change, and in this particular example linked the solution to the transformation of unequal power relations, including social, technical, economical, political, and cultural relations.

Building the capacity of people to do their own politics

The post-2015 development agenda is driven by the UN-defined deadline of September 2015. As such, short-term influencing opportunities and the need for 'quick' evidence to input to the HLP process was in direct conflict with the timeframe needed to build sustainable, empowered processes on the ground that enabled a demand for change at the community level. There was not enough time and resources to enable people experiencing poverty and marginalisation to recognise that they themselves must define actions and engage with decision-makers on local and national levels to advance their rights claims.

Although this challenge was partly anticipated by the *Participate* network when engaging in the post-2015 process, and the PRG consisted of members who already had long established working relationships with marginalised groups on the ground, there was little that could be done to mitigate the short term nature of the global policy process. Nor to shift power dynamics in a way that radically transformed people's ability to *participate* in the direction of development. There was neither the time nor the resources to support this empowerment process and build the capacity of people to do their own politics. The challenge is to facilitate direct and sustained advocacy by marginalised communities.

Lessons learned from bringing voices on the ground into global policymaking processes

Bringing the voices on the ground into global policymaking is a process of incremental change following multiple pathways with multiple types of engagement.

In *Participate's* final reflection workshop, the analogy of scaffolding was used to explain and visualise the policy influencing process (diagram 3 - page 52). Whereby each scaffold contributes to bringing the voices on the ground into the policy making process. For this change to be sustainable and responsive to the perspectives of people living in poverty, there is a need for multiple types of pathways and people's engagement.

Investment is required in processes and resources to transition ownership of the global process to the community level and enable people to hold the global framework to account in their local settings.

Participate aimed to bring the perspectives of those in poverty into decision-making processes, however this is not enough: the global decision-making processes must feedback to the local and national levels, and enable people living in poverty and marginalisation to take action and advocate for their rights.

There is a need to work across the whole continuum from local to national to global, to build and sustain effective change.

A lack of emphasis on national level engagement poses challenges in influencing the post-2015 agenda. This lack of emphasis not only engenders a dearth of spaces but also a shortage of actors with capacity to do this. Limited emphasis on building the capacity of people living in poverty and marginalisation to engage in sustained political action on national (and local) levels will result in marginal or insufficient systemic change.

Demand for change needs to happen at every level of the system – from local to global and global back to local. Like the scaffolding and incremental change analogy above – every level needs to build on the foundations for transformational change.



Ground Level Panels were developed to bridge the gap between people living in poverty and national and global actors

¹⁶ Find out more about the Egypt GLP on the *Participate* website (www.participate2015.org/ground-level-panels/egypt-glp/).

If we believe that people have the right to have a meaningful say on the global policy that affects them, then it is our responsibility to learn how to do this in the most effective and ethical way. *Participate* was built on the learning from previous attempts to influence global policy.

Reflecting on whether we were successful in achieving what we aimed to set out to do: it is probably too early to tell. We were successful in getting local messages synthesised to the global level, and this has had some influence on the outcomes of the post-2015 debate. ¹⁷



Diagram 3: Scaffolding the policy process

¹⁷ This contribution also drew upon thinking from Cornwall, A. (2002) *Making Spaces, Changing Places, Situating Participation in Development*, IDS Working Paper 170, Brighton: IDS