

PAIN & JOY OF PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

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The pandemic amplified all the layers of global and local lack of justice, care and responsibility and also the lack of any learning from the experience.

The global capitalist system crumbled many of the solidarity and safety-nets, especially in the public sector, that were supposed to take care of all of us. Mainstream media mostly disoriented people, while governments often failed to provide comprehensive information, measures and organise institutions to be accessible and effective. People are being left behind, different needs remain unacknowledged or ignored. A massive part of the pandemic burden largely fell to women and girls. It's no surprise to see their resourcefulness on the front lines providing urgent support where needed and/or opening alternative spaces. The Global Resilience Fund recognised the importance of timely support to girls and young women and created space for experimental learning by doing.

Who is being left behind?

I believe awareness of the limitations of our current work and reach is something we need to have in mind all the time. We gathered to fill the gap, but no one is perfect, and there is always more to be done. I asked myself this from the position of a panelist. I'm aware I can't be representative of any group. My political beliefs, identities and experiences span across many settings. However, many are beyond my expertise and experience, and I need to put extra effort to learn from them. We, as panelists, needed to acknowledge our privilege for being part of this process. We also needed to understand the limits of our outreach, language barriers, and all other differences between contexts.

The Fund proved when there is a will, there is also a way, and I was happy to learn there were panelists with different backgrounds involved in the process. Experience taught me to be aware of tokenistic approaches, so being able to see significant

resources put to enable accessible and inclusive processes, brought me joy and gratefulness for such a transformative process.

If it's too easy, it's probably wrong

Having in mind the responsibility for movements and groups who spent resources in applying, the team-handling of significant workload, the donors who trusted us with the money to be put where it was needed the most, decision-making was not easy. In addition, each panelist brought their unique experience, interests, preferences, but also their trauma. It all shaped our perceptions and the aims we were passionate about. Ability to hear and understand each other's point of view is critical. Virtual opportunities created by the Fund for panelists to meet and regularly communicate through a secure platform were valuable. Still, the real learning happened in the decision-making process.

We've realised that no matter how flexible funding guidelines are, the reality is fluid and refuses to fit into any box. It would be superficial to run never-ending checklists of identities and issues we want to support. Rather, the substance is what matters. We've learned quickly that there is more than meets the eye, and applications can't be our only

source of information. We engaged our colleagues and contacts from as many fields as possible to provide a more nuanced view from the local context. While we all live in a system that oppresses us, forms and methods of oppression vary.

Our responses and alternatives we are developing should not be forced to fit pre-set criteria of people behind computers. It wasn't just an exchange of knowledge, it was also an exchange of emotions. I was so grateful to be in a group of people devoted to being accountable and fair. However, our understanding was sometimes different, and it took a lot of discussion, energy and effort to see other perspectives and jointly find a way to do no harm with our preconceptions. It can be messy and painful, but I prefer that rather than some generic perfect-looking self-celebratory shallow setting, because people put their hearts and knowledge to serve the diverse movement.

Participatory funds have immense potential for participatory learning

Even though we are in the internet era, fragmentation is greater than ever, and our bubbles narrow our scope of understanding. With all sorts of things burning all around the world, and the overflow of irrelevant

information and multiplication of the same type of content, it's challenging to resist the simplified, distorted hyper-production of shallow narratives, to keep an attention span and be aware of different realities and avoid reproducing stereotypical arguments, even in the activist context. Additionally, being there for each other, demonstrating solidarity beyond mere words, is much needed in these times of spectacle, anomie, and urgency.

Through participatory funds, panelists also have the opportunity for participatory learning. Where better to learn about different realities and look for resources than from peers with diverse backgrounds. A secure platform used for communication can serve as an alternative media source, breaking mainstream narratives and learning the nuances of local realities. It is also a pool of contacts where one can find potential collaborators and the help needed to support local struggles. This is also applicable to grantees. Online meetings and safe platforms can facilitate access to information and goods, to learn from other people's experiences, avoid similar mistakes, and develop proactive strategies. Being in a

position to co-facilitate the calls with some of the grantees allowed me to see matching points for people with similar struggles and those who've already figured out the way. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, we need to learn about and from each other. Immense experience and knowledge lie in our movements, we need to share it, amplify it, use it.

Participatory processes and horizontal structures come with great demands. It is our responsibility to share power and all sorts of assets, capacities, and trust. That's real solidarity and a way forward for everyone. ■

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