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Some Thoughts on the use of Research and
Research Activities in the English-Speaking Caribbean

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by
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As one who has been involved for a number of years in the field of education, both in the formal education system and in non-formal education programmes at the community level, I have always been concerned about the practice and use of Conventional Social Science REsearch in the Caribbean.

The claim by conventional researchers that research should be "objective" and "value free" as far as possible, the uses of highly technical language - the jargon which the average person - (the objects of the investigation) cannot understand, the way in which the findings are disseminated - (articles in scholarly journals or in the bottom drawer in some university office), the use of research as a tool to improve the status of an "intellectual elite": these have all bothered me for a number of years.

I have always felt that an area like the Caribbean with its many problems, could not afford the "luxury" of this type of research. I beleived that we needed to use research to provide us with information which we could use immediately to solve some of our many problems. We needed to experiment with research models which would provide us with data oriented to Action For Development Now.¹

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1. Research - A New Concept - Pat Ellis. Paper prepared for setting up a Research Unit for Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL) Trinidad December 1974.

In my work (voluntary) in various communities mainly in Trinidad (1971 - 1977) I used a number of techniques, methods and experimental models with youth, adult, church and community groups in seminars workshops and training programme. These methods proved to be very successful enjoyable to participants and resulted in very high levels of participation of the persons involved. Built into these activities was on-going self and group evaluation, counselling, critical analysis and reflection. Activities included use of problem dramas, group interviews, use of poetry, skits, songs etc. to collect and disseminate information, to analyse and understand problems, experiment with solutions and generally to develop in the individuals a greater awareness of self and situation.

During that period, of course I was totally unaware of the term "Participatory Research"

However, I was aware of the hostility of the average community person to Conventional Research and so frustrated with "intellectual snobbery" of the conventional researcher ./ my work with communities evolved. I believe, as a rejection of and an alternative approach to learning, knowledge/education.

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In more recent years in my work in the smaller islands of the Caribbean I have grown to believe that we in this region are perhaps one of the most researched areas in the world. We have been the "objects" of large body of "academic" research for generations. Generally speaking we (the majority) have had very little say in what aspects of our lives should be research and why. We have had very few benefits as a direct result of such research - most of the data generated by such research has been interpreted by non-Caribbean people and is inaccessible to us.

In my view - we have nothing to loose if for the next few generations we attempt to be the "subjects" of our own research activities, if we turn the tables and place more emphasis on Participatory Research rather than on Conventional Research.

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I think however that we must be vigilant, we must be wary of expending all of our energies on the intellectual debate about Participatory Research, on developing the jargon which will legitimize it and make it acceptable to the "academics" and "intellectuals." If we do this we will still be "using" the masses as objects and manipulating them for our ends.

It is far more important, in my view to spend our energies and the time it will take to help the person in the community - in the street, the common "non-intellectual" to become involved in research activities and to understand the importance of his/her role in this process in relation to the development of the individual and of the society.