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The ILO in Participatory Research*

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The PORP Programme

1. Late in 1977 the ILO launched a programme on Participation and Organisation of the Rural Poor (PORP) which in its first phase consisted of case studies of initiatives to promote PORP in different developing countries at both macro and micro levels by governments as well as NGO's, private groups and by the rural poor themselves (see [1] for a conceptualisation of the programme). The programme invited the collaboration of social researchers from all disciplines, and suggested use of the method of "dialogical research" in which the researcher would seek to stimulate the rural people into deep individual and collective reflections in an effort to obtain their authentic perceptions and thinking on the questions involved.

2. The programme got encouraging response from third world scholars from a variety of disciplines -- sociology, economics, political science, law and agricultural chemistry. In an initial phase studies were undertaken in India, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, North Vietnam and Chile. Not all of these studies however could apply the dialogical method significantly mainly because of the background and orientation of the researchers. In fact, the methodology of study varied widely with a variety of mixtures of working with documents and statistics and working with people. The set of studies nevertheless illuminated a wide range of aspects of the problematique of PORP, perhaps more than would have been obtained if they had been limited to a common framework or methodology. These studies have been put together in a volume whose publication is currently

* Report prepared for the International Forum on Participatory Research, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, April 13-22 1980.

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under consideration in the ILO. The editorial synthesis of the studies picks up illuminations obtained from these studies on such questions as the unity of ends and means in participation promotion; contradictions in promoting participation -- e.g. leadership vs. the people, class contradictions, bureaucracy and law vs. the people --; transition to collective agriculture; the economic basis of participation; self-reliance; and people's democracy. A separate comparative analysis has also been made of the experiences in Vietnam, Tanzania and Ethiopia in the transition to collective agriculture from the point of view of peasant participation. [5]

The Bhoomi Sena Study

3. The methodology of "participatory research" -- meaning for the time being research in real partnership with the people whose life and experiences were to be researched -- had not been explicitly considered in this programme until completion of the well-known study of Bhoomi Sena [3] in which the ILO participated. This study evolved into a participatory study of its own variety and it may be worthwhile to recount some of its major methodological aspects:

- a. The methodology for this study was not pre-designed but evolved spontaneously through progressive interaction of the four external researchers with the "vanguard group" of the movement (10 members).
- b. The external researchers came to study this movement to improve their own understanding of the process of social change but could hardly claim themselves to be organically involved with any such process anywhere. All of them belonged to, or closely worked with, international bureaucracies in the UN family, and except possibly for the Indian member of the team none of them was taking any remote personal risk in this involvement with a militant people's movement. In this sense there was no participation by the external researchers in the people's struggle being researched. The partnership in research on the movement that nevertheless developed was therefore in the

nature of a "technical co-operation" (in documenting and analysing the movement) only, and no claim can be made of any deeper commitment. Whether one likes to call this true "participatory research" or not, this is what this particular research was.

c. The vanguard group of Bhoomi Sena were interested in this co-operation because, as far as the present writer was able to assess, (a) they judged this research team to be sympathetic to their movement and trustworthy concerning whatever privileged information the research might reveal; (b) they were stimulated in preliminary discussions of movement with this team (reported in [3, Ch. 5: "A dialogue with Bhoomi Sena]), from which they judged that their own understanding of their movement could improve from such discussion; (c) They considered that a documentation of their movement and a written down conceptualisation of their method of struggle and organisation development could be useful in promoting their movement further and in communicating better with potential allies of their movement; and (d) they judged that some international recognition of their rightful struggle could be useful.

d. The broad contents of the "technical co-operation" that emerged consisted of the following:

(i) a series of visits were undertaken by members of the external research team, individually and in groups to their area for dialogical investigation on various aspects of the movement, including participant observation of "Tarun Mandal" (village-level poor peasants' assembly) meetings and "shibirs" (inter-village conscientisation camps);

(ii) members of the vanguard group themselves collected information on the movement for the study and prepared background papers as inputs into it:

(iii) workshops were organised for the external research team and the vanguard group to discuss and analyse together different aspects of the movement:

(iv) the external research team collected documentation and information pertinent to the movement

available in government offices and in the published literature;

(v) responsibility was divided for drafting chapters for the final study between the external research team and a senior activist in the movement;

(vi) the draft chapters were discussed together by all the draftees and revised;

(vii) the revised draft was presented to the full body of the vanguard group for comments and veto on any matter they might not wish to be reported or said about their movement;

(viii) the final study was published under the authorship of the external research team alone, as the vanguard group considered, and actually said in response to invitation to join in the authorship, that this would be an "irrelevant distraction" for them.

4. It is perhaps not for the ILO to ask for participatory research with a deeper involvement by its external collaborators in people's movements and struggles. But the Bhoomi Sena study demonstrates, the present writer believes, the value of "participatory research" in the nature of a more limited form of technical co-operation that could benefit a people's movement or organisation directly at the same time that it enhances general understanding of the processes and problems of promoting people's participation and organisation, and enriches this understanding by bringing the people's own analytical reflections into it. There is also information that portions from this study are getting spontaneously translated into local languages and being discussed among grass roots activists and groups of the rural poor in some other countries. The ILO is now encouraging and seeking to promote such research through its FORP programme, (see [2]), thereby to contribute to the promotion of a new tradition in social research that would not use the people as mere objects of enquiries undertaken with perceptions of alien professionals, and would be of some direct use for the people in their struggle for betterment of their lives.

5. Further studies in this direction have been initiated - in Chile of a peasant organisation; Peru, of a peasant movement; India, of an agricultural workers' organisation;

Bangladesh, of the work of the Centre for Human Development in organising landless rural labourers; Pakistan, of peasant struggles for implementation of land reform; and Nepal, of the Small Farmer Development Programme. All these studies are using the method of dialogical research more seriously than in most of the earlier set of studies, and a couple of them (Chile by Sergio Gomez and Peru by Santiago Roca) may match or surpass the Bhoomi Sena study in terms of the actual "participatory" content of the research.

Constraints

6. Progress in the ILO's contribution to participatory research since the PORP programme was launched two and a half years back, has been constrained by the availability of social researchers with the requisite commitment, as well as willingness to collaborate with the ILO, in this area. In many developing countries social researchers even with a more limited commitment to work with people rather than with statistics, are rare. Where there are such persons, they often have their own specific ideological commitments and may not consider working with most international organisations worth their while. The constraints of the language, and of the policy prescriptions that may explicitly be advocated in publishable reports to be prepared for such organisations, may also act as a barrier. On the positive side, however, the ILO's mandatory concern for the promotion of PORP is stimulating some social researchers with a similar, or overlapping, concern to collaborate with it in this programme.

Law and PORP

7. The ILO is co-operating with the International Centre for Law in Development (ICLD) in developing a parallel programme on Law and Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor being executed by the ICLD, which is giving a legal dimension to the ILO's PORP programme. In a first phase the ICLD has launched a series of case studies in a number of developing countries (e.g. India, the Philippines, Peru, the Sudan, Swaziland, Kenya and Tanzania, to investigate, also by the methods of dialogical and participatory

research in varying degrees, the role of existing and potential law and legal resources in promoting PORP. It is envisaged that the ILO will collaborate with the ICLD in some further such studies that will be launched. This will be followed by the initiation of pilot action projects to develop models of assistance to the rural poor in developing their collective capability to handle their legal problems. This programme has already mobilised committed lawyers in a number of developing countries for interacting with the rural poor and for giving legal assistance to them in unconventional ways, which must be viewed as a most encouraging development.

Grass-root Self-reliance

8. A new research programme that the ILO is launching as a follow-up of its initial research discussed above, consists of a series of case studies on interventions to enhance the mobilisation of local level human and material resources for greater employment and income generation for the rural poor, and in particular to generate grass root self-reliance under different socio-economic and historical circumstances. These case studies will search for insights into questions such as how self-reliant consciousness emerges in traditionally dependent communities or is sustained and strengthened in other communities subjected to development initiatives from outside; what are the internal and external forces that operate against the generation or realisation of this consciousness; what kind of educational effort and organisational development are most conducive to the promotion of grass root self-reliance; and what kind of external intervention or assistance may be helpful or harmful in this respect (see [6] for a discussion of the problematique of self-reliance in the Bhoomi Sena movement). In an initial phase it is planned to have four such studies in Africa and four in Asia; in a second phase the programme will be extended to Latin America. It is intended to use the methodology of participatory research as fully as possible in these studies within the constraints discussed above, and the ILO invites the collaboration of participatory researchers in this programme. It is being planned, subject to the availability of resources, to have an international workshop at

the end of each phase where researchers, policy makers and people's leaders will get together to review the studies and make recommendations for policy and action at various levels aimed at stimulating and assisting processes of self-reliant rural development.

Action Research

9. Insights being obtained from its research on PORP are being fed into the ILO's technical co-operation and advisory services with governments, national institutions, NGO's, etc., engaged in or initiating projects experimenting with participatory rural development. In its future work the ILO will give some priority to participatory research that will be more directly preparatory to the initiation of specific action projects by and for the particular community of rural poor with whom research on their life and reality will be done, in a search for models of participatory rural development. Proposals for collaboration with the ILO in such "praxis" in the promotion of PORP will be welcome.

TCDC

10. Finally, the ILO is planning to launch a programme of technical co-operation among developing countries (TCDC) in the broad field of participatory rural employment creation in which attempt will be made to promote systematic cross-fertilisation between innovative action research in the developing countries in mobilising the rural poor for self-reliant economic and social co-operation to improve their lives. The process of such cross-fertilisation is also envisaged to be one of progressive co-operative praxis -- i.e. co-operative study of each other's experiences among sets of such experiments grouped on the basis of a common basic strategy, to be followed by a process of learning from and helping each other to improve each experiment, getting together again to review the results of such cross-fertilisation, etc. (see [7] for elaboration). It is envisaged that the process will involve the rural poor in vital ways throughout.

References

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