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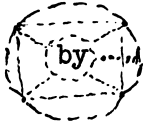
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Ljubljana, April 13-22, 1980

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PR176

THE ISSUE OF METHODOLOGY IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH



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by

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The question of methodology in participatory research is a subject of on-going analysis and discussion. No consensus has yet been reached on what constitutes the methodology in participatory research. What this paper proposes to do is to highlight the major "methodological" analyses that participatory research has been subjected to in the past few years and, secondly, to critically examine the validity, constraints and shortcomings of the various methodological positions.¹ In so doing, this paper intends to provide a basis for a further analysis and clarification of the issue of methodology in participatory research.

Before plunging into examining the issue of methodology in participatory research, it is necessary to briefly outline what has been conceived as participatory research, its origins and its intentions.

BACKGROUND TO THE EMERGENCE OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory research arose in the context of thoroughgoing questioning of such issues as the relationship between the purposes and consequences or the means and ends of social research, the implications and outcomes of using the conventional research methodologies in the social sciences, the relationship between researcher and the researched,

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1. The bulk of the material of this paper is largely based on Discussion Papers presented at the African Regional Workshop on Participatory Research, July 1 - 7, 1979, Tanzania. The papers are
 1. Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ulla Vuorela, Yusuf Kassam & Yohana Masisi, "The Politics of Research Methodology in the Social Sciences"
 2. Deborah Bryceson, Idnzi Manicom & Yusuf Kassam, "The Methodology of the Participatory Research Approach"
 3. Deborah Bryceson & Kemal Mustafa, "Participatory Research: Redefining the Relationship between Theory and Practice."

neutrality and objectivity. These issues were re-problematised in the light of a critical reflection on political, methodological and epistemological questions. Consequently, the basic precepts of the dominant bourgeois methodologies in social science research were challenged both in the developing and industrialised societies.

The dominant bourgeois research methodologies which are predominantly positivist and empiricist have made knowledge creation as the monopoly of the social scientists alone. The ordinary people have been considered as being incapable of producing knowledge and analysing it. Very often research has been carried out for the sake of research, as a mere academic exercise. It has exploited the people, the villager and the worker, without changing their poor and oppressive living conditions particularly in the context of persistent poverty and entrenched "underdevelopment" in many Third World Countries. The people have been reduced to mere objects of research.

The use of the dominant research methodologies in universities and other institutions produce analyses which are descriptive, non-explanatory, technicist, politically sterilised and ahistorical. The use of such bourgeois methodologies determine the conditions of production of knowledge. Social scientists trained in the use of such research methodologies in the universities are becoming more and more of technicians who have are able to use of package of techniques but cannot think and develop explanatory theory. The agencies which finance social research (state, private foundations, international agencies and universities) also work within bourgeois methodologies. Social research which has been reduced to a bundle of techniques is.

increasingly carried out under factory conditions making social science research highly specialised, technicised and fragmented in character. Research institutions and agencies have proliferated solely geared to the production and sale of research expertise. The qualitative aspects of social science research have been sacrificed to facilitate elaborate quantification, statistical analysis and computerisation. It is within this broad context that participatory research took roots.

THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The basic aim of participatory research has been conceived as progressive social change for the betterment and liberation of the oppressed people wherever they are. The following broad features have emerged to characterise participatory research.

Firstly, subjective commitment on the part of the researcher to the people under study is essential. This implies a rejection of the possibility of 'value-neutrality' and of the conception of the social researcher as a tool or technician. The researcher must have a sensitivity and democratic identification with the people, the 'oppressed'.

Secondly, there is close involvement of the researcher with the researched community. The researcher is perceived as a committed, participatory social actor, who must seek to combine his critical insight and knowledge with the understanding and resources of the local people to trigger new awareness of contradictions facing them. The concept of 'dialogue' between the researcher and the community is emphasised as a reaction to the manipulateness of positivist social

research, the over-simplification of social reality through the use of conventional research methodologies such as the survey approach and the alienating, dominating and oppressive character of such methodologies.

Thirdly, the approach is problem-centred. Research is perceived not as mere data-gathering, the result of which can be acted upon by others, the policy-makers. Rather the objective of social research is to understand the conditions underlying a problem in order to resolve the problem by transforming those conditions (be they perceived as social, political or social-psychological).

Fourthly, the participatory research is conceived as an educational process for both the researchers as well as for the people with whom the research is conducted. The close and active interaction between the researchers and the people through dialogue and discussion, is ultimately aimed at action towards the solution of social contradictions.

Fifthly, participatory research stipulates respect for the people's own capability and potential to produce knowledge and analyse it. Knowledge creation as being the monopoly of the professional researchers alone, as commonly practised by conventional researchers, is challenged by the PRA.

In short, participatory research has been described as a three-pronged activity: an approach to social investigation with the full and active participation of the community in the entire research

process; a means of taking action for development; and an educational process of mobilization for development, all of which are closely interwoven with each other.

THE ISSUE OF METHODOLOGY

Having outlined the broad features of participatory research, one may now look at the question of methodology. What is the methodology of participatory research? An analysis of this question has become a subject of vigorous controversy. Critics have argued that the concept of participatory research as portrayed through the five features outlined above constitutes only as a certain broad approach to research and not an explicit methodology or a comprehensive research package. It is argued that the participatory research approach devoid of a formulated methodology and a theoretical framework embraces a wide range of research practices as well as different versions of political activism. Consequently, participatory research's basic approach in some instances has been labelled as "pragmatic", "ad-hoc", "eclectic" and "idealist."

To elaborate on these criticisms, it is argued that the reason why the participatory research approach (PRA) accommodates a very broad political spectrum is because the approach is subjective and idealist and which depends upon the individual researcher's political views, sensitivity and knowledge. The participatory research approach, in recognising that the people being studied are oppressed or have unrealised capabilities and potential, implies an idealist position

which posits the humanness of the researcher as the basis for his/her identity with the oppressed. In so doing, oppression is morally romanticized. The PRA researchers are not able to recognise the contradictions between their stated intentions and the real implications.

It is also argued that in participatory research approach, no attempt has been made to theorise or even question the class interests that the researcher objectively serves and the probable false consciousness or ignorance of the oppressed who are probably socialised to accept ruling class ideologies or who are concerned with their own petty property interests. The participatory research approach ignores material causation, that is, the development of forces of production and production relations. In solving problems through progressive social action, the PRA largely operates at a micro-level instead of a macro-level which looks at the wider context of the economy and the objective social forces which influence remedial social action.

The participatory research approach has also been criticised as being pragmatic. Pragmatism posits knowledge as eventual rather than antecedent. Knowledge is produced through practical problems. Knowledge is viewed as a means to an end. The relationship between theory and practice is produced by experimental practice. Knowledge begins and ends with practice. Theory is disregarded.

It has been argued that since PRA is pragmatic and eclectic, its philosophical and theoretical nature is obscured and mystified.

As a result, there is no guarantee that PRA will always bring about progressive social change. PRA could also be used for reactionary purposes.

In response to the criticisms on pragmatic participatory research, critics have argued that the apparent eclecticism and pragmatism of the PRA are in fact its very strengths in that the researcher is able to work within a wide variety of constraints (such as the politics of local and external funding agencies, institutional membership, bureaucratic authorities and ruling ideologies) and also within a wide range of socio-political settings. The different versions of PRA as they surface through a wide spectrum of political activism are inevitable so long as care is taken to ensure that research was not used by the oppressors against the oppressed. Pragmatism is unavoidable since there are no ideal conditions anywhere. Therefore, to adhere to a single explicit methodology in PRA is to greatly delimit its potential for even a modest social change among the many different groups of the oppressed, disadvantaged and exploited people. It is further argued that the pragmatic nature of the PRA should be conceived as an important phase in an on-going struggle to liberate the oppressed. What is really inherently wrong with being ad-hoc and pragmatic?

The critics of pragmatic participatory research have proposed historical materialism as the most appropriate methodology for participatory research and they argue that this methodology is most logically consistent with the intentions of the PRA, namely, progressive

social change for the betterment of the people. Participatory research situated within historical materialist methodology has been defined as research structured by the democratic interaction of the researcher and the oppressed classes of people and takes the form of a dialectical unification of theory and practice reciprocally between the researcher and the oppressed classes. So conceived, it is argued that participatory research practice is an aspect of historical materialist practice which involves ideological, political and economic action undertaken in furtherance of the class struggle. This methodology is applicable to all social conditions and national contexts. The problems of the oppressed classes can best be understood and the subsequent solution of their problems can be achieved by analysing social formations using the fundamental concepts of mode of production, forces of production and relations of production.

The critics of the historical materialist participatory research recognise that historical materialism is an elaborate and scientific methodology for the analysis of society at the macro-level. However, they argue that it is overly theoretical and abstract and consequently renders participatory research a mere theoretical and abstract exercise devoid of concrete action towards the solution of the daily living problems of the oppressed classes. In other words it diverts the attention of researchers from immediate problems to macro-abstractions. In this respect pragmatic participatory researchers are more concerned with dealing with situations and problems at the micro-level, such as a community, a village, etc., rather than the society at large. It is further argued that historical materialist methodology is too rigid

and dogmatic and therefore runs contrary to one of the basic elements of flexibility in participatory research as it was first conceived.

If historical materialist methodology is an action undertaken in furtherance class struggle, then advocates of the pragmatic participatory research argue that their approach also fulfils the same role using its own approach. However, historical materialists while admitting that pragmatic participatory research bears resemblance to historical materialist participatory research, argue that what renders them distinct is their differing philosophical foundations. Some practioners of the pragmatic participatory research in fact have incorporated materialist elements into their work but the historical materialists view this trend as an "eclectic" assimilation from the holistic materialist philosophy. On another level, the advocates of pragmatic participatory research argue that the historical materialists have failed to give due credit to the development of qualitative aspects of pragmatic participatory research.

C O N C L U S I O N

This paper has briefly outlined the current analysis of the issue of methodology in participatory research. It has encapsulated the major arguments of the two main schools of thought on the question of methodology in participatory research. In both the camps there is a consensus on three main scores: the dissatisfaction

with the conventional research methodologies in the social sciences; the recognition of participatory research as being a significant departure from the conventional or bourgeois social research methodologies along the political, epistemological and methodological dimensions; and the intention of participatory research of bringing about progressive social change for the betterment of the poor and the oppressed. The major disagreement is centred on the question of an appropriate methodology that can be employed in achieving the goals and purposes of participatory research.

Several questions still remain to be answered. For example, how does one define a "methodology"? Is there a need for a specific and rigid methodology for participatory research? Does it not suffice to have a well thought out "approach" instead of a "methodology"? In achieving the stated intentions of participatory research, is it necessary to select any one of the existing well-formulated methodologies such as historical materialism or is it valid and acceptable to combine and incorporate various elements of different methodologies? The former alternative will be regarded by some as a super-imposition while the latter will be considered by others as being ad-hoc, pragmatic and eclectic. Given the basic intentions of participatory research that can be carried out in a variety of socio-economic conditions and situations, what is the most appropriate methodology: a tailor-made methodology or a pre-fabricated methodology. These are some of the fundamental questions that have to be addressed in our struggle to systematise the concept and practice of participatory research.