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PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH COMPONENT

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE PARTICIPATORY
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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A BRIEF NOTE ON THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Much is said today about the Participatory Research methodology. The expectations are high, but the results few. When undertaking a project under the label of participatory research one is taking a heavy responsibility; the methodology is one of the vaguest, one of the most encompassing and one of the most demanding approaches that exists today.

Participatory research has the aura of a new concept. Actually, little is new about it, except that it recently has been used in planning and implementing development projects.

The idea of living among a group of people to understand its view of the world, its life and its struggle is the essence of anthropology. This is also one of the basic assumption of participatory research. There is an emerging school of anthropology that focusses on action-oriented research as well. Undeniably, there are also anthropologists who consider the community they live in as an object of study, a culture not to be disturbed.

The notion that mutual respect should be the basis of any interaction, that the 'natives' know more about their world than we do, is not new to any anthropologist. Therefore, this emerging group of action-oriented anthropologists should be considered as participatory researchers.

What is new about this methodology is that development agencies and developers are now trying to capitalise on it because they realise that it is more successful in reaching the poor and underprivileged than the usual top-down approach. Even the Congress of the United States has come to argue for an increased monitored participation at the grass-root level of the developing countries (Cain, 1979). All of a sudden, the poors are believed to have the answers and it is for us to go and seek them.

The question remains, however, what is the ultimate goal of Participatory Research?

Before we tackle this difficult question we should define what participatory research is. Reviewing the literature on the subject we find that there are as many definitions of participatory research as there are people writing about it. We can find a whole range of suggestions, from the most idealistic to the most down to earth, from the most vague to the most

specific. A series of papers written on the subject are provided as Background readings.

Most of the authors, however, share a very basic idea, ie. the mobilisation and integration of the rural poor into the research process so that they can benefit from it. The research process, in this context, refers to some development programme, not academic research. According to Hall (1975) the whole community should be involved in the research project from the formulation of the problem to the discussion of the possible solutions. Anisur Rahman (1977) calls for the participation of all the rural poor into dialogues and critical reflection to acquire consciousness of their situation. The Mexican team (1979) asks that all the oppressed think about reality together and while relating to the researcher answer a series of questions regarding their social position.

In this context we can comment from experience that the rural poor are so tied up in production activities, struggling to feed their families, that they have no leisure time to indulge in an abstract formulation of problems or lengthy discussions of solutions. The time spent in discussion has to take place in the evenings and it is best for small groups of people rather than large meetings to exchange views. The problems discussed have to be immediately relevant to their

every day life. Problems of production or organisation of work are the most commonly and spontaneously discussed topics.

Needless to say it is impossible for one person to carry on discussion sessions with all the villagers. Automatically small groups of people are formed and the researcher tends to spend more time with some groups than with others. Unfortunately they are not always the most needy. The very poor work so hard that they have little energy for this type of activity.

Dialogues are very artificial, as they put people in a position where they feel quite uncomfortable, having to express themselves in a formal manner on subjects which are rarely talked about. Informal discussions prove much more fruitful, particularly when they are initiated by the villagers themselves. The alternative offered by the Mexican team is the one most appropriate to the village situation. Focussing discussions on specific questions regarding the social position of the rural poor is easier and more stimulating. It opens up new venues and leads to a search for explanations.

If the manners in which the poor are brought to participate are varied, the expressed goal of participatory research is also different according to different authors.

According to Hall's suggestions, our goal should be to establish the community's needs, to increase awareness and commitment, to liberate the creative potential of the rural poor and mobilise them to solve social problems.

Anisur Rahman, on the other hand, asks that we mobilise the resources and initiative of the poor for their own economic and social advancement. The action should be based on the poor's perception of their situation. They should learn to take initiative, assert their independent personalities, express their creative faculties.

The proposals do appear to be remote from the immediate reality of most rural poor. In Malaysia, what could a suggestion such as 'express your creative faculties' mean to a poor rubber tapper entangled in debts and struggling to feed his children? These aims are all cast in very vague terms, such as 'awareness', (we are not sure what the poor should be aware of) 'creative potential' (in what sphere?) 'initiative', 'assert independent personalities'. All these expressions remind us more of a middle class concern than that of underprivileged villagers. All these cloudy suggestions also contribute to hide the only valuable objective of participatory research, ie. the restructuring of society.

However, given the constraints under which participatory research has to operate, this goal is not only rarely mentioned, but obviously not often included as a desirable outcome. Undeniably there is much to gain for the poor if they are involved in the identification of their most pressing problems and encouraged to take action to solve them. But, are we sure they are going to be listened to, are we sure they are really in a position to act. Are they not caught in a network of constraints far more difficult to change than these authors would want us to believe? As responsible researchers should we not be aware of these constraints? Are we not, in the final analysis, part and parcel of the very structure oppressing the people we aim at liberating?

Hall insists that researchers involved in participatory research should not take any theory with them when they go to the field. As was pointed out by Lindsey (1976) such an empiricist approach can only lead to the maintenance of the status quo and the continuation of the power relationships within the given structure. If the researcher has to limit his or her understanding of the social reality to what the people say about it, little can be done to overcome the problems. To expect and require that the villagers develop their own theories about themselves is not only unrealistic, but it

serves to hide the reality they are in. A subjective approach where the 'native' opinion is almost taken as sacred will not contribute to the liberation of the poor. It only hides the complexity of the linkage systems they are caught in. It is unrealistic to expect that the rural poor have the perspective needed to understand their embeddedness in an oppressive social structure. Most of us tend to take for granted the existing power relations and social structure we are in.

Is it not a fallacy to believe that by participating, by having dialogues, by expressing their individuality and creativity the rural poor will affect the balance of power? What all this can do, at its very best, is to provide information to those in the upper position so that they can exert their power with less violence, with more subtle means. In the process, it gives rural people the impression that they have a say in the administration and planning of their future.

Anyone involved in participatory research should have a clear theory of society with which to apprehend empirical reality so as to understand the powers at play as well as the tensions present, in the society. He or she should also be aware of ethical problems that will arise and be prepared to take the responsibility of his or her actions.

THE KAMPUNG KOTA MENGGUANG EXPERIENCE

To what extent were these basic principles applied in the Kampung Kota Mengkuang experience? The following discussion highlights some of the main guiding points of the approach. It is impossible to include every decisive step; this can only be done in a much more detailed discussion.

The starting point consisted of establishing a good relationship with all the villagers. This relationship was based on mutual respect and honesty.

Since the researcher in this case is of a different ethnic background from the villagers, great care had to be taken to ensure that cultural as well as religious prescriptions were respected. This was essential to create a common bond.

Respect of the villagers' customs and manners was the opening step to discussions and exchanges, since a number of these cultural habits had to be learned. In the process reflection on some of these cultural traits ensued.

The villagers on their part had to overcome an initial reticence to having a woman living on her own and wandering about the village as her work requested.

Honesty was a more demanding principle. One can dress like a villager, eat like a villager and speak like one but in the end a researcher from a University always remains a member of a different class. There is no point in masquerading as a peasant when the villagers know very well that she is being paid to do it.

Having a university education sets anyone apart. My access to knowledge is greater and this the villagers know. On the other hand, I know little of village life, and in this sphere they became the educators. Objectively speaking the relationship is imbalanced from the start. Rather than hide this fact, it seems better to simply acknowledge it and be open to them. The villagers enjoyed asking an endless number of questions on all topics, which I answered to the best of my knowledge on all occasions.

Since the villagers themselves have relatives who are richer and more educated, I could as someone of higher status therefore be absorbed into the kin network. Up to today, the villagers are like brothers and sisters, parents and grand-parents to me.

Another dimension of honesty required that I state clearly from the beginning why I was in their village. It was odd to the villagers to see an educated person coming to stay with them and insisting on living as they do. They thought

it strange that I carried my own water, cleaned the house and served coffee when they visited.

This, I explained to them was because I wanted to really understand village life, to become familiar with their difficulties and problems as well as share in the happy moments. As time went by, the villagers realised that it was possible that an outsider could learn to live like them. Part of being honest about my work, included also the information that I was only one of many researchers involved in a large project based at the University Sains and subsidised by UNICEF. I also made it clear that this project would require me to write reports which would be forwarded to the Malaysian government, UNICEF and the university. The kampung people were made aware as well of the fact that we did not need to mention everything in these reports; in doing so I meant to allow them to select what should be included.

The KANITA project was presented to them as 'road' which could be used by the villagers to initiate any projects or any change they wished to see. It was specified, however, that I would not be carrying out the projects for them, but rather assist them in their initiative. This last point was always stressed, though it could not be fully implemented at all times.

At the early stage a census of the village population was taken. It consisted of a single sheet of paper being filled with basic demographic data and could not be called an questionnaire type of survey. As I went from one house to the next to gather this information I got to know every household in the village. In many cases genealogies were also collected to help me trace the complex connections between all the villagers.

This happened to be an important tool to establish relationships since it provided an excuse to visit every one and chat informally with all the villagers.

Once this preliminary introduction was achieved, the focus of the research process changed. The next step was to try to understand why so many government projects in the village had failed in the past. This was a very sensitive question and it created what Anisur Rahman calls 'critical reflection'. The in-depth exchange of opinions was not recorded, so that every one involved could say what was on his mind.

It was at this stage that theoretical backing was most precious. The villagers have almost always been blamed for the failure of projects, even by their own headman. When asked to comment on this point the first reaction of most villagers was to repeat the often heard story of ineptness to improve their lot.

More probing, guided by a better understanding of the relationships at play, revealed a different picture. Hours, even days, were spent bringing up this topic over and over again, until the whole power network revealed itself so clearly that the situation appeared very depressing to all of us.

As this reflection period was proceeding, possible projects were also discussed and implemented. This was deemed essential since it is only through getting together and working on a common plan that we really become aware of the requirements as well as limitations of our wishes.

As was mentioned earlier the lack of free time is a major constraint in the village. (for more details refer to Background Information I). Added to this constraint is the reluctance of a number of villagers to be involved in projects calling for heavy responsibilities. This can partly be explained by their past experience and the present situation in the village (refer to Background Information I).

However, I believe that the involvement of the Kampung people is crucial, on the condition that it is combined with an on-going reflection on what the implications of the process are, if problems have to be overcome. Because of this assumption

I started some projects, rather than wait for the villagers to initiate them, so as to create and demonstrate a working situation. This seems a better alternative than wait for the villagers to take the first step, and then repeat that they are stupid or uninterested, if they do not come forward.

In other words, the emphasis was not so much on the initial implementation. We concentrated more on the process whereby firstly a plan is drawn and discussed; secondly, information is gathered (usually from different agencies) and thirdly brought back to the village for their consideration; fourthly a proposal is formulated and again discussed with the villagers before it is subsequently submitted to the relevant agencies. The choice of project, however, was not random. All the projects related suggested to immediate needs of the villagers.

Another advantage of early commitment to a project is that, while we try to implement such a project we can really understand the array of subsidies and assistance offered to villagers, the complexity of the channels to reach them and the power of bureaucracy. This would lead to stimulating discussions on the relevance and efficiency of these many agencies. On the other hand, open minded officers can gain insights into the villagers' needs and wishes in the process.

To sum up, it is difficult to say whether we strictly followed the participatory research methodology, since the guidelines were so vague to start with. We can say, however, that we respected the basic principles involved, namely to include the villagers into the formulation and design of projects while focusing on basic needs. In the process, we attempted to understand some of the relationships at play.

Since we were aware of the impediments operating at various levels, ours was not an idealistic approach. We did not harbour thoughts of restructuring the world in such a short time. If we succeeded in clarifying with the villagers some of the constraints that are at work in their environment, some of the relationships they are caught in, and if we manage to fulfil some of the basic needs, we will consider our effort worthwhile.

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