

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND PARTICIPATORY SOCIAL ACTION

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Social Research and Social Action are similar and interdependent. They both entail certain human activity in a given social setting. They are interdependent because they rely on each other and feed each other. Social research invariably seems allied with social action; social action is invariably based on some social research. One can even argue that coercive and repressive social action also entails certain data-base. Investigative and police agencies all over the world rely upon certain research process to meet their objectives. This paper is an attempt to highlight such a relationship and mutuality between various forms of social research and social action. Its primary intent is to demonstrate this similarity in the case of traditional social research and top-down social action : two streams which are currently very popular. Its further objective is to argue for a similar linkage between participatory social research and participatory social action.

The paper is organized in four parts. The first part, which follows right after this introductory note, identifies certain dimensions on which the similarities of social research and social action can be analyzed. The second part is an attempt to utilize these dimensions to analyze traditional social research and top-down social action. The third part develops significant characteristics, on these dimensions, of participatory social action based on the case

studies presented in this Forum. And, finally, the last part derives certain implications for participatory research in the light of the above.

Social research and social action are basic human activities of knowing and acting. They become sometimes more formalized and organized, but occasionally not. When we come across disciplines, schools, institutions and professionals of social research, we are then in contact with its formal and organized face. Similarly, social change agencies, development programmes, departments of development, development administrators and consultants represent a formalized and organized face of social action. In many ways, social research and social action activities are similar. However, there are some very basic differences as well. The goals and purposes of social action are different from social research. While social change, in some broad sense, is the common objective of social action, generation of knowledge, in at least vague terms, the overall objective of social research. The methodology of social research is quite distinctive and well-developed; so is the methodology of social action. They follow different methods in comparison to each other. The professional training of social researchers is quite different from that of social action agents. The culture of social research organization is quite different from that of social action ones. One could probably add several more differences. However, our interest in this

paper is to highlight these dimensions in which social research and social action are likely to be similar. These dimensions are intended to focus upon one crucial set and do not imply to be the only set.

One dimension of this set is the distribution of power. It is quite frequent that one comes across such questions as knowledge for whom? and social change in whose interest? These are the questions of distribution of power. Knowledge in itself is power; any change implies use of power. So it is important to analyze the existing, maintained and implied distribution of power in analyzing social research and social action.

Assumptions about what constitutes critical resources is another dimension of this set. Every human activity, including research and action, involves certain resources, which types of resources are assumed to be critical for the successful accomplishment of social research and social action is the question being raised here. Several categorizations are possible : internal vs. external resources; physical vs. human resources; small vs. large resources; primitive vs. sophisticated resources. This dimension sets out some of these possibilities.

Linked to the above two and yet distinct in some ways is the question of control. What group of people control these activities? And what is the basis of that control? It is

conceivable that even unequal distribution of power may allow control in the hands of those who are initially powerless. This control may be based on numbers, expertise or distance. This control may be limited to a few activities. Control may rest with one group in an activity and it may still maintain the critical resources are external or physical or large. So while it does appear that control is linked to the two earlier dimensions, it is being used here as a separate one mainly to highlight its importance in social research and social action.

Technology of social action or research is the next major dimension being used here. Technology implies both tangible and intangible. Tangible technology is reflected in physical elements of social research or social action. Intangible technology means techniques and frameworks for those techniques. As intangible technology, frameworks for doing social research or social action become very important. What is the nature of technology used?

Finally, measurement of outcomes is the last dimension of this set. Outcomes could be measured in gross, aggregate terms or micro, human terms; it may emphasise quantitative outcomes or qualitative ones. The outcomes may be determined by some external reference group or standard; they may also be evolved internally. These are the questions that concern us in outcome.

The above dimensions have been used to analyze traditional social research and top-down social action in the next part. This analysis is intended to underscore their similarities as well as to further clarify and establish the significance of these dimensions.

Traditional Research and Top-down Social Action

Based on accumulated experience of last three to four decades, it is possible to examine some of the similarities between traditional social research and top-down social action. This comparison of similarities between them can be further illuminated by using some illustrations. Table-1 presents these comparisons :

- (a) **Distribution of Power :** One of the most visible characteristics of traditional research is the remarkably skewed power distribution between the researcher and the so-called "subjects". The researcher has complete power to decide upon the focus, methods and outcomes of research. The most frequently carried out experimental and survey research projects demonstrate this distribution of power very clearly (Brenner, et al., 1978).

Similarly, top-down social action efforts are, almost by definition, characterized by concentration of power at the top. The elites decide what social action

TABLE : 1 : SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH AND TOP-DOWN SOCIAL ACTION

DIMENSIONS	TRADITIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH	TOP-DOWN SOCIAL ACTION
1. DISTRIBUTION OF POWER	UNEQUAL; ONLY WITH THE RESEARCHER	CONCENTRATED AT THE TOP FROM WHERE ACTION FLOWS
2. CRITICAL RESOURCES	PRIMARILY OF THE RESEARCHER	EXTERNALLY OBTAINED
3. CONTROL	BY EXPERTISE, NORMS OF TRADITIONAL RESEARCH	BY EXPERTS IN THE FIELD
4. TECHNOLOGY	COMPUTERIZATION, WESTERN MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS	BORROWED, BIG, RECONSTRUCTED
5. OUTCOMES	IN QUANTITATIVE TERMS, DEFINED EXTERNALLY	AGGREGATE; QUANTITATIVE INDICES

is good for the masses, they design strategies for carrying them out and they implement such efforts. Any developmental project in the developing countries during the last three decades will bear this out. Take the case of agricultural development projects. Most notable among them is the so-called "green revolution". This social action effort was conceived by the elites in the government of various developing countries, mostly in consultation with their counterparts in

developed countries and international agencies like the FAO and the World Bank. The farmers in these developing countries had relatively little power in this entire effort of agricultural development. Of course, other sections of rural society, like the landless labourers, were completely ignored.

It is also interesting to observe that the strategy of "green revolution" was fed and supported by massive traditional research carried out in agricultural research institutes of advanced countries and their subsidiary counterparts in developing countries. Of course, the launching of "green revolution" created major funding opportunities for further support of traditional research in these research institutions. This generated a mutually supportive cycle for traditional research and top-down social action.

- (b) **Critical Resources :** Both traditional research and top-down social action efforts rely heavily on resources external to the particular social setting they are focusing upon. In the case of research, this resource is primarily the expert researcher who is alien and external to the system. He is seen as the most critical resource on which the success of the research effort is assumed to be dependent.

No attempt is made to recognize or utilize the resources available within the setting. The "subjects" and their resources are denied and neglected. Many research projects do not even consider the possibility of consulting the "subjects" in their design of research instruments.

Similarly, top-down social action projects rely heavily on resources brought in from outside. The expertise, capital, know-how and equipment are all brought in from outside. In the case of "green revolution", massive inputs in the form of High-Yielding - Variety seeds, fertilizer, agricultural implements (like tractors) and credit, were made available from outside. No effort was made to even supplement these from internal inputs. This was based on the primary assumption that external resources are critical to the success of agricultural development.

This dynamics of bringing in external resources and relying upon them as critical to successful research and social action efforts also has international aspects. Several examples are available where external personnel (external to the culture and the country) are heavily relied upon in research and social action efforts. Mbilinyi et al. (1979 : 31) present the example of a World Bank Research Project in Egypt : "Of the six

principal investigators, just two are Egyptians. The rest are high standing World Bank officials with the required expertise and research experience. None of the five advisers comes from Egypt."

It is a still more common occurrence in the case of top-down social action projects dependent on international or bilateral assistance. Roberts (1977 : 19) gives an example of a project to eradicate leprosy in one province of an East African country. He shows that 45% of the annual budget went for supporting eight European personnel, 22% on supporting 60 African personnel and only 1.5% on drugs. A glancing example of external resources obtaining criticality:

- (e) Control : Another dimension, related to the two above, is that of control. In traditional research, control is primarily with the expert researcher. As a professional researcher, he uses his expertise to control the entire research activity. The "subjects" are controlled, their responses are controlled, spurious influences are controlled. The basic tenet of traditional research is control -- obtained through statistical or experimental manipulations based on the expertise of the researcher. The "subjects" are ensured to be passive and the targets of influence by the researcher. The questions, designs, analysis are controlled by the researcher; only answers and information

is to be provided by the "subjects". Moreover, the "subjects" have no control over what happens to this information, how it is used and for whose benefit. In the World Bank Research Project in Egypt mentioned earlier, the respondents had no control over any aspect of the research activity. Since the World Bank was interested in finding out the threshold level of schooling, young children between the third and sixth grades had to provide information. They remained passive information--providers, that is all!

Similarly, top-down social action efforts remain primarily expert-controlled. These experts decide the elements of the social action project, obtain and provide resources and tell the people how to use them. The changes, who are the targets of such social action efforts, do not have any control; they have to passively take what is made available to them. Continuing our analysis of "green revolution" efforts it is easy to see that the farmers were left with no control about what crops to sow or what methods to follow. It was a package made available on the basis of the experts' judgement about what was good for the farmers in that a region. The expert-controlled "green revolution" was initiated by setting up a large delivery system that controlled the supply of inputs to the farmers.

- (d) **Technology :** Both traditional research and top-down social action rely on borrowed and big technology. Bulk of the traditional research uses Western models of research. These research projects entail sophisticated instrumentation and use of computerization and machine-based calculations for analysis. Mbilinyi et al (1979 : 5) outline the characteristics of the technology of traditional research.

"As research has become subordinated to the interests of capital, increasingly capital-intensive techniques have developed in the social sciences. The application of mathematics to social science research in the form of statistical analysis is highly identified with computer analysis. In turn, such techniques demand large scale endeavours involving large sample populations and highly efficient (cost-saving) techniques of data-collection, with the questionnaire format (including rating and ranking scales) being the most common technique world-wide."

My own experience in working with small farmers in India has convinced me of the irrelevance of questionnaires as a reliable method of data-collection. What was clear from my experience was that I used Western framework of research to the rural Indian

setting.

What Mbilinyi et al (1979) described for Africa, is also true for other underdeveloped parts of the world. Kaplan (1976 : 151) describes similar impact of foreign training and frameworks on social science researchers of Latin America : "The influence has been brought to bear through the training of professionals, teachers, and research workers in the United States, through joint research projects implemented in that country and in Latin America and through the financing of national and regional centres". Kaplan goes on to argue how social science researchers have become a techno-bureaucracy where they have assumed the technical proficiency and expert-control of a techno-bureaucrat. The phenomenon of high, imported technology-based research is well-spread and rooted in the developing countries across the world.

Similarly, top-down social action efforts are based on the models developed in the advanced countries of the world. These models are firstly based on the reconstructed logic of that situation; and secondly, that situation has few similarities to the situation obtaining in developing countries today. These models of social action have, therefore, relied on capital-intensive, sophisticated and big technology borrowed from the developed countries. The example of "green

revolution" further illustrates this case. The model of Integrated Agricultural Development was based on the assumption that input of capital and know-how will lead to a spur in agricultural production. This was obtained by massive inputs of HYU seeds, fertilizers, credit, tractors, etc. Of course, this led to the increased agricultural production. By only the medium and large farmers benefitted from it. They increased their production substantially, they generated a lot of surplus. But small farmers and landless agricultural labourers did not benefit; most of the small farmers became landless; and, the gap between the rich and the poor in rural areas further widened. Yet, the reconstructed logic of this model based on American experience made sense : inputs of capital and modern technology can trigger development. It did not happen in India this way.

The international aspects of this borrowed technology and models of social action are further intensifying the dynamics described above. Roberts (1977 : 19) puts it succinctly :

"The European discovered illness among the tribesmen and had an immediate line of thought :
CURE : bring in hospitals, pharmacies, medical schools...
..... He came across illiteracy, but thought : EDUCATE :
build primary schools, secondary schools, universities...

He found men drinking palm wine, with several wives and shamelessly naked; he decided to SAVE : establish mission stations, seminaries, cathedrals....."

Clearly, high technology dependant : both traditional research and top-down social action efforts.

- (e) Outcome : Lastly, both traditional research and top-down social action efforts are primarily concerned with quantitative outcomes. Both are likewise goal-directed, not process-oriented. In traditional research, concern with quantitative data outweighs other considerations. The success of research is seen by how much quantitative and quantifiable data has been generated. The other related outcome is publication. Publication in a "reputed" journal or as a book is a highly valued outcome. Moreover, the criteria for determining the success of these quantitative outcomes are determined by other researchers. The portrayal of a certain social reality is judged as valid or invalid not by the people who participate in and create that reality but by those who are professional colleagues of the researchers. In most traditional research, no outcomes from the point-of-view of the "subjects" are either aspired for or valued. What happens during the process of research is not important; what is important is the outcome in terms of quantitative data after the research.

Likewise, top-down social action efforts are primarily concerned with outcomes in quantitative and aggregate terms. That is why Gross National Product, Per Capita Income, Birth Rate etc. are the indices that are most commonly used in assessing the outcomes of top-down social action projects. Again the emphasis is on goals, not the process. The process of liberation/development is not a valued outcome; it is the positive shift in aggregate indices that is a valued outcome. Therefore, Integrated Agricultural Development Programme was called a successful "green revolution" because all major aggregate indices showed improvement. Per Capita production and income, overall agricultural output, etc. showed improvement. But the process-orientation analysis brought out the fact that certain groups benefitted; poor became poorer; landlessness increased. What happened to the life of a small farmer and his family was never an important outcome to be examined in this project.

In sum, therefore, the traditional social research and top-down social action are very similar to each other in the five respects presented above. They tend to support and feed each other largely because of these similarities. The remarkable similarity between the two is not accidental; it has evolved historically to benefit each other.

PARTICIPATORY SOCIAL ACTION :

In recent years, there has been a growing realization that top-down social action efforts do not serve the development objectives. It has now been amply demonstrated that the logic of top-down social action is antithetical to development. In some ways, a paradigmatic shift is taking place in the concept of social action; this new paradigm is that which is being called participatory social action here. In the framework of Kuhn (1970), a paradigmatic shift leads to a radically new way of perceiving and analyzing reality. Participatory social action is radical shift from top-down social action. Increasing large numbers of people are finding answers to developmental problems through this new paradigm of participatory social action. As an emerging paradigm, different definitions are being forwarded for participatory social action. This section is an attempt to bring out salient differences between participatory social action and top-down social action using the dimensions of the earlier section. In presenting the key elements of participatory social action, I have heavily relied on the case studies presented in this Forum.

- (a) **Distribution of Power :** Participatory social action implies horizontal distribution of power as opposed to vertical which was the case with top-down social action. It means that power is the central theme of participation; and, participatory social action entails widely shared, collective power by those

who are the focus of social action. This in turn also implies that the people themselves become agents of social action. Moreover, the power differential between those who control resources and those who need them has to be reduced in participatory social action. Pearce and Stiefel (1979 : 5) emphasize this aspect : "It must be accepted, therefore, that the struggle for people's participation implies an attempted redistribution of both control of resources and of power in favour of those who live by their own productive labour."

The tribal women of Dhulia in India participated in their own wage negotiations. Their active participation in the strike had increased their power vis-a-vis men who had historically negotiated women's wages. Their participation in strikes and negotiations had also increased their power vis-a-vis the rich farmers. Similarly, the peasants in the Ayacucho region of Peru participated in the development of their communities. This participation increased their power vis-a-vis the professionals and experts; and they worked together as equals. The families of Bwakiri Chini village in Tanzania reduced the power gap vis-a-vis the government officials by creating their own village committee. This participation by the villagers implied

greater power equalization than was visible earlier.

Several more examples can be cited to illustrate that participatory social action entails power equalization. The participation of people in designing their own social action efforts promotes collective empowerment and thereby reduces the gap vis-a-vis the elites. To that extent, participatory social action becomes very threatening to existing status quo.

- (b) **Critical Resources :** Participatory Social Action implies that people and their skills are the most critical resources. The participants, their knowledge, understanding and skills are primarily emphasised and relied upon in participatory social action. The Tanzanian example shows that there is a belief that 'peasants can solve most of their developmental problems by utilising skills, experiences and available local resources'. This belief led to the development of improved grain storage facilities by the peasants themselves based on their accumulated experiences. In the course of time, village storage committee became the ongoing resource group in this matter.

Another illustration of people themselves being the most critical resource is available in the women's cooperative store in Bangchuk village of South Korea. The women's club members decided to run their own

cooperative store for essential supplies in the village. They organized themselves to run this store efficiently and goods became available at cheaper prices. The essential point here is that participatory social action is based on people's own resources and skills. This negates the reliance on external resources as demonstrated in top-down social action.

- (c) Control : In line with above, the control of participatory social action is in the hands of the participants themselves. Invariably it is collective control, even though exercised through a group or representative. Experts are used but only as additional resources controlled by the participants. The expertise of professionals can influence the course of action but it is within the conscious choice of the participants. An excellent illustration of this attempt to control the experts is presented in the case on land ownership in Appalachian region of USA. An active citizens' group began to question the land settlement project of the Appalachian Regional Commission by raising the issue of landownership. The Commission, with its massive resources, attempted to thrust the experts' views on the citizens' group. The citizens' group wanted the experts to be controlled by it. This case brings out very clearly the centrality of control in participatory social action.

Similarly, the villagers of Bwakira Chini in Tanzania knew their grain storage problems and their local resources and environments. Therefore, the outside experts were used as complementary to their skills and controlled to focus upon the prime need of the villagers. External expertise joined hands with the villagers in developing solutions to the latter's problem of grain storage. In the case of Chemical Workers Union in Norway, the analysis of technological change was initiated and controlled by the union. Professional researchers were used in this analysis but under the constant control of the union. The office-bearers of the union and workers of the plant took major initiatives about what needed to be analysed. The experts were then used to assist them in the process of analysis. In essence, then, participatory social action implies control over the design and process of social action by the participants themselves.

- (d) **Technology :** The technology of participatory social action is embedded in the local context of the participants. Their own models of development are evolved and utilized in the design and implementation of social action efforts. The technology of such social action efforts is small, relevant, based on local conditions and needs, appropriate and locally evolved. It is based on the participants' own logic, though

occasionally assisted by the experts. Take the grain storage effort in Bwakira Chini village of Tanzania. The technology is relevant, the storage facilities can be easily constructed and maintained by the villagers; the development of modified storage facility took place from within the experience in the village.

Similarly, the experience of environmental assessment in Big Trout Lake, northern Canada illustrates the native peoples' struggle to obtain locally relevant waste disposal system. The Big Trout Lake Band Council took initiative to use experts to assess the government proposed Sewerage system and treatment plant. The proposed system had ignored the local needs and conditions. The Band Council, therefore, proposed a different system which was based on relevant, small and local technology. In the case of Ayacucho region of Peru, the lack of water was seen as a major problem. Similar attempts were made to obtain technology which is relevant and small.

While participatory social action entails small and relevant technology it also is based on models of change which are evolved by the participants. The social action against liquor initiated by the tribal women of Dhulia was designed and implemented entirely according to the model evolved by them. The problem, its analysis and methods to solve it were entirely

theirs. No "imported" model of tackling their problems was imposed or used.

- (e) **Outcomes :** The outcomes of participatory social action are not measured in quantitative, aggregate terms. They are more micro and processual in nature. These outcomes concern the human beings involved in social action and are in qualitative terms. Several likely outcomes of participatory social action can be identified from these case studies. In the case of a women's cooperative store in a South Korean village, the self-governing organization of women was an important outcome. In the case of Latin American immigrants to Toronto, the EOLA, coordinating body of Latin American organizations, was an important outcome.

Self-confidence is another important outcome of some participatory social action efforts. The tribal women of Dhulia gained self-confidence after their participation in strike and wage negotiations. The participation of students in developing their own literacy materials in England enhanced their self-confidence. A related outcome of such participatory social action efforts is enhanced awareness. The students of the above-mentioned literacy project gained awareness of themselves. The women who participated in Home Economics programmes in the urban slums of

Lagos, Nigeria became conscientized as an outcome of their participatory experience.

Linked to self-confidence and awareness is the educational outcome of participatory social action. The participants in such an effort learn new ways of perceiving reality and acting on that reality. The peasants of Phillipines learnt how to use their traditional social and political leaders in collective interests. Education also took place among Latin American Immigrants who participated in developing community self-portraits. Finally, participatory social action brings about collective empowerment and strength for future actions. This was amply demonstrated in most cases, notably the Appalachian citizen's group.

This analysis reveals that participatory social action is characterized by an equal distribution of power, reliance on local resources, continued control by the people, small and locally evolved technology and processual, qualitative and human outcomes. To the extent these are important elements of the emerging paradigm of participatory social action, there are some major implications for participatory social research. The next section is an attempt to outline these implications.

NATURE OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH :

It has been argued in this paper that traditional social research and top-down social action seem to go hand-in-hand. They are similar in many important ways and tend to support each other. Given the emergence of a new paradigm of participatory social action, it is necessary that participatory social research develops characteristics that make it possible for its alliance with participatory social action. It is quite possible that traditional social research may be supporting the participatory social action. But this is an untenable position; an unsteady equilibrium that is not going to enhance the moves towards participatory social action. In fact, several examples are already emerging which point towards this trend of traditional research aligning itself with participatory social action. One such common example is the international concern for people's participation. When Robert McNamara talks about participation of the rural poor, does the World Bank support traditional research into people's participation? When FAO shows concern with people's organizations, its Rural Organizations Action Programme (ROAP) suggests action-oriented research which is very similar to traditional research. Another common illustration is the scholastic debate on participatory social action. Conferences and workshops are being organized to generate strategies for participatory social action. And scholars attending these conferences argue for models and approaches based on their

traditional research. These trends make it imperative for vigorous articulation of participatory social research as an ally of participatory social action. Both can mutually support each other and only then break the vicious circle of traditional research and top-down social action. Based on this alliance of participatory social action and participatory research, the following are some of the key implications for the nature of participatory research :

- (a) The foremost implication for participatory social research is its clear attempt at power equalization. The participatory research effort is undertaken in a manner that the distinction between subjects and objects is eliminated. The organization of participatory research, therefore, assumes significance. While the researcher may initially begin the research process with an advantageous power position, it has to be followed in a manner that power equalization takes place.
- (b) The second implication relates to the local resource utilization in the research process itself. The assumption that people are the critical resource is to be translated in practice. People can contribute ideas, information, insight and analysis; people can also provide the context for inquiry. Participatory social

research relies on people as the most central resource for its success.

- (c) Thirdly, the control over the entire process of participatory research has to be mutually shared. The "expert" researcher is not the sole arbiter of the focus methods and analysis of research. The "expertise" is at the specific request of the people and yet it can influence the direction and preparation of research.
- (d) Participatory social research is in a way people's research. It entails a framework that is evolved from the local context; it uses a technology that is small and appropriate. Methods of data-collection and analysis are such that they contribute towards an understanding of micro situations and their macro contexts.
- (e) Finally, participatory social research has several outcomes. Educational and action outcomes are equally valued as knowledge and learning outcomes. Moreover, the knowledge and learning outcomes are not confined to the researcher alone but shared by the people. In this notion, the criteria for evaluating outcomes are determined by the people involved in participatory research and not by any external reference group. This dynamics of several valued outcomes makes more complex demands on participatory social research.

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