User Participation in Research

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Participatory research is about people, regardless of who they are, getting involved in a continuous process of reflection and action that is, ultimately, transformative.

This short note provides: *some methodological definitions; outlines the basic principles and framework; identifies the different types of participation; lists 10 myths about the methodology; summarises its strengths; describes transformative learning; and point's to some on-line resources on the topic.*

Definitions of Participatory Research

- It involves a whole range of groups of people, with different amounts of power; including the exploited, the poor, the oppressed, the marginal;
- It involves the full and active participation of the community in the entire process;
- The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed and solved in the community;
- The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people themselves;
- The research process can create a greater awareness in people about their own resources, and mobilise them for self-reliant development;
- The analysis will be more authentic and accurate than some other research approaches because the community participates: and
- The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process, not detached but militant.

Basic Principles
Even though research approaches may differ, the following basic principles tend to hold true for participatory research:

- A defined methodology and systematic learning process – everyone learns together;
- Multiple perspectives are described and valued; reaching consensus is not always necessary;
- Group learning processes vary, but are based on dialogue and can utilise different inputs;
- Context determines the approach – no blueprint;

- Facilitation is key to the process;
- Change is a natural product of the research process; capacities may need to be developed to undertake action as part of the learning process.

Basic Framework for Action Research
Participatory action research operates within a framework in which:

- There is an existing context within which there is a range of dissatisfaction and satisfaction;
- The context and specific issues are questioned, through dialogue (problem identification through critical reflection);
- New ways of looking at this stage emerge and challenge the existing conditions (developing theories and new understandings);
- People mobilise to bring change based on these new ways of seeing and understanding (action is undertaken); and
- Change within the context is achieved and dialogue continues (through further reflection and action)

Different types of Participation
It is important to recognise and address the different types and degrees of participation:

- Passive participation;
- Participation in information giving;
- Participation in consultation;
- Participation for material incentives;
- Function participation;
- Interactive participation; and
- Self-mobilisation

Ten Myths about Participatory Research
1. It's quick.
2. It's easy.
3. Anyone can do it at any time.
4. It's just a set of tools.
5. It has its root in specific disciplines.
6. It has no theoretical base.
7. It's a new invention.
8. It results in more training.
9. That those involved are neutral.
10. That it's non-political.

And what do we need to recognise

- Participatory research does not *"need"* academics;
- It thrives on doubt and humility;
- It flourishes in situations of contradiction and self-conflict;
- It arise out of communities in which universities are a part;
- It contributes to the range of strategies and methods that are needed by community members to make their lives better;
- It encourages resistance to existing power relations;
- It improves with practice; and
- It leads to transformation.

What is Transformative Learning?

How may it be facilitated and even recognised when it takes place? Transformation is clearly a powerful and value-laden term. For some it may be described as a heightened awareness and understanding of power and a new understanding of one's identity in relation to the world. It may be seen as an irrevocable change for the better, at the level of the individual, or even in the form of greater social justice. From some perspectives, transformative learning indicates a need for questioning of assumptions about power relations and existing structures, at a personal and at a societal level. From others, it is the process of developing capacities, competencies and perspectives that can allow us to view the world and ourselves more self-critically; to be reflective and adaptive using a heightened sense of awareness; and indeed to keep developing personally and collectively over time through this enhanced capacity for awareness.

Where to Find Out More

On-line participatory research resources:

Collaborative, Participatory and Empowerment Evaluation
www.standford.edu/~davidf/empowermentevaulation.html

Crescent: The Community Research Network E-mail Discussion List
www.comm-dev.org

PARNet: Participatory Action Research Network (Cornell University, New York)
www.parnet.org

Institute of Development Studies, Participation Group
www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/

Caledonia Centre for Social Development
(See Social Activism Papers below)

Papers on Social Activism

Caledonia Centre for Social Development Website

All the papers in this web-based collection are short with none over 10-pages in length. Many are no longer than 5-pages. A range of social activists have written them from different perspectives, locations and in varying situations. A number of them date back to the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Within the collection there is however a degree of consistency in language, ideology and ideas. All articulate an agenda based on: *struggle, solidarity, social change, self-help, mutual aid, self-reliance and countervailing power as a means of liberation and self-development.*

Countervailing Power	
PIDA and its Vision of Development (Sri Lanka)	Globalisation & Popular Resistance – The African Case
Self-reliance and the role of Sensitised Agents	Community Organising (Philippines Style)
Organisation of the Poor (Sri Lankan Style)	In Distrust of Movements
Community level Social Mobilisers	
Poverty Focused Community Assistance Service – Kenya	Community Agents – Scotland
Something Worth Stealing: the Concept of Community Agents – Sri Lanka & Scotland	
Networks of Community Agents – A guide	
Participatory Methods	
Participatory Reflection and Action Methods	A Short Note on Participatory Research
Village Appraisal – A Critique of Current Practice	16 Tenets of Participatory Action Research
Cooperative & Social Enterprise	
Poverty Reduction through Self-help	Community Enterprise Companies
Role of Cooperatives in Social Development	Mutualising the State – How local communities can run public services
Guidelines for creating a supportive environment for the development of cooperatives	Mutual Aid – The evolution of Friendly Societies in Britain
Promotion of Cooperatives	Labour-sponsored Solidarity Funds - Quebec
Five Good Reasons for Cooperatives	Ownership Matters – New Mutual Business Models
Statement of Cooperative Identity	Member-Owners: A Guide to Societies based on the Principles of Mutuality
Hands Around the Globe – the dynamics of Credit Unions	Mission, Beliefs & Operating Principles of Credit Unions