

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: RESEARCH AND SOCIAL ACTION

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(An extract from a longer paper entitled
“RESEARCH AND SOCIAL ACTION WITH THE
GRASSROOTS”

Prepared for REPOA, 2001)

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The key issue that has run like a thread through this analysis has been the relationship between research and social action, on the one hand, and between research institutions and the poor or grassroots, on the other. We have deliberately used the concept of 'social action' rather than 'policy', so as to connote the full range of potential 'action' and networking that may be supported by poverty research processes. The formulation of 'a' policy statement with attendant objectives and strategies of action is only one aspect of the process, and is highly identified in practice with government and donor control.

Participatory research, and participatory action research in particular, connote the breakdown of the barrier between research and action, as the poor/grassroots become the owners of the research/action process. A wide variety of potential actions can be envisaged here, from short-term strategic planning and implementation to solve short- and long-term problems at community level, to advocacy for change at local and national level. In all cases, however, these actions are about exercises in the use and control of power to depict reality, its causes and what to do about it. For this reason, it is a mistake to view participatory research and action primarily as a set of *techniques*. Rather, Blackburn and Holland (1998:3) point out,

Participation is a way of viewing the world and acting in it. It is about a commitment to help create the conditions which can lead to significant empowerment of those who at present have little control over the forces that condition their lives.

The right to increased access to and control over key resources such as land and other natural resources, social services, and human resources is given particular significance by people at the grassroots level (Mbilinyi et al 1999). This includes the right to information.

In this section, we explore the possibilities of linkages with the grassroots within different approaches to research and social action, in general. Most of our attention has been devoted to participatory processes. In the next section, we consider the meaning of these approaches with respect to the potential roles and functions of REPOA.

An important set of questions guide this analysis:

- Who is the researcher, the knower?
- What position does s/he have (in the household, the community, the organisation, the nation ...)?
- Who is the known, the one being researched?
- Who decides on the research topic? Research design? And so on

¹ This is an extract from a longer paper entitled "Research and Social Action with the Grassroots" prepared for REPOA, 2001.

- How is the research conducted?
- Who interprets the findings/data?
- Who receives information about the research? In what language and format?
- Who makes the policy/action recommendations and interacts with decision-makers?
- Who decides/controls what happens after the research?
- Who provides the (financial/human) resources for the research?

These are examined in the text that follows. Comparisons of the different approaches are also presented in Table 1 in a highly simplified form.

During our feedback seminar (23.3.01), people noted that government was comfortable about advocacy work carried out by professionally-oriented organisations such as REPOA, when participating, for example, in policy formulation groups and consultative workshops. However, the government was extremely uneasy about grassroots advocacy work. Why is this so? Underlying this unease is the question of *who has the right to make decisions?* Who has legitimacy? Some actors in governing circles may find it less palatable for ordinary citizens, and especially the less educated people living in poverty, to gain greater power and authority in decision-making. However, if the government is committed to the participation of the poor, as shown in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, it needs to facilitate a process whereby the poor are seen as legitimate actors in analysis and policy-making. REPOA can play a major role in the facilitation of this shift in thinking and in structures of power.

2.1 Top-Down Survey Research

Survey research aims to produce ‘objective’ facts about ‘reality’, whereby the researcher remains neutral and uninvolved in the situation/politics in question. They are guided by a set of rules and regulations about how to conduct research, and assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is produced. Researchers also operate with assumptions about the nature of society and social change that are rarely questioned in a reflexive way. They tend to focus on ‘doable’ topics that lead to the investigation of observable and measurable ‘factors’ or ‘variables’. More likely than not, these are symptoms rather than causes of poverty. Quantitative statistical analyses is regarded as necessary so as to prove and disprove hypotheses, and sampling frames are constructed to meet scientific demands for rigour and representativeness.

By definition, the researcher must be a professional expert [Table 1]. The nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched is rarely questioned, nor the impact of the researcher’s own positionality in society/community on the research process itself. The ‘researched’ members of the grassroots or the community living in poverty, are positioned within the research process as ‘objects’ of the investigation. The task of the researcher is to find out and compare specific characteristics of the researched, such as their age, sex, marital status, level of income, assets owned, attitudes and behaviour. These attributes are analysed statistically, and reports are written in English in an academic or applied, policy-oriented manner. The reports are often presented in the form of research reports to a meeting of fellow experts but rarely to advocacy civil society organisations (CSOs) and virtually never to grassroots

communities. Reports are also presented directly to policy-makers and practitioners, sometimes for advocacy purposes, and occasionally used for training purposes at higher education institutions. Shorter versions may be reproduced through the press and electronic media such as radio and tv, usually in English.

Much of the research funded by REPOA has been of a survey nature, especially those which focus on policy and technology sub-themes.

2.2 Top-Down Qualitative Research

Qualitative research operates with many of the same assumptions and procedures, but recognises that the reality in question is not amenable solely to observable, measurable indicators. Qualitative measures and procedures are needed to explore more subjective questions such as attitudes and perceptions. Nevertheless, the professional researcher remains in control of the process in a top-down fashion, sets the research agenda, and interprets the information without the participation of the grassroots/poor (Table 1).

The search for objective facts remains the aim of the research. However, more complex methods are adopted to ensure objectivity when dealing with qualitative research processes, and there is less demand for sophisticated statistical devices. Nevertheless, even in this approach it is likely that the researcher will obtain only the 'official transcript' (Scott, 1990) or what Richard Mabala calls the 'right answers', rather than a nuanced understanding of what is at stake. The ways in which local governance arrangements maintain or exacerbate poverty are least likely to be aired.

This is the second most common approach found in research that has been supported by REPOA, especially in sub-themes on gender; social cultural determinants; and to a lesser extent, the environment.

2.3 Extractive versus Empowering Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

Extractive Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), along with about 28 other participatory procedures, have emerged and are used in poverty-related studies worldwide (Chambers 1995). PRA 'training' has been carried out in Tanzania for policy-makers and practitioners involved in Local Government, for example, led by Robert Chambers himself! More common, however, is for donor-led projects and programmes to employ PRA in order to find out the views and attitudes of different groups of people in the community, including people living in poverty (UNDP/Shinyanga ... , Narayan 1997). These participatory procedures have been used in primarily extractive research processes, to be discussed in this sub-section, but they have also become part of Participatory Action Research. The key determinant of the nature of the process is the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the end use of the research, and the social and political dynamics of the research process.

The distinction between extractive and transformative approaches in research is crucial. Chambers (1995), who is most identified with PRA type work, has noted three uses of 'participatory'. Participatory may be a cosmetic label, to make a proposal or a process sound good, but where the reality remains top down. The second use is co-opting

practice so as to mobilise local labour and reduce costs. This is very common today in Tanzania, in the context of local government reforms and the extension of cost sharing and user fees in basic social service delivery.

In both of these uses, 'they' – the grassroots, the poor – participate in 'our' project/programme. They are perceived to be 'beneficiaries', rather than key actors or partners. The process intends to 'motivate' or enhance awareness eg enhance gender awareness among the target group (sic), rather than to 'enable' or 'empower' the poor to empower themselves. The poor remain the main 'object' of research, but participate in a more dynamic way in the data collection process. The fact that authoritarian governments and leading institutions such as the World Bank now embrace participatory approaches is a likely indication of how these can be exercised without disturbing the more fundamental status quo.

The third use, involves "an empowering process which enables local people to do their own analysis, to take command, to gain in confidence, and to make their own decisions" (ibid: 30). In this case, 'we' participate in 'their' project. Nevertheless, the outside expert remains a key part of the process. A great deal of attention is given in participatory research, with and without PRA, to planning 'exit' options for the outsider researcher/animator. However, the idea that the grassroots group could be in command, and might contract an outsider researcher/animator to carry out facilitation for them, is rare.

What is the outsider role in the third empowering usage? To convene, initiate, facilitate group processes, while the 'insiders' carry out the actual analysis.

The main object of research is often 'up', not 'down', such that communities try to understand the local power structure, for example, which blocks their capacity to access and control natural resources. Another grassroots group may endeavour to trace the chain involved in marketing a given crop, from the smallholder producer or peasant in the first instance, (including household dynamics here), through middle 'men' to global market institutions and the ultimate consumer. The goal of the research is social change. Hence, the information acquired is used for planning and advocacy purposes.

Formal protocols are of less importance than the behaviour and attitude of the experts, or what Chambers calls the 'uppers'. Animators have to learn to be silent, to listen, to sit on the ground attentively and not to lecture, not 'to wag a finger or a stick'. According to Blackburn and Holland (1998:6),

The point is not what to change as much as how we change ourselves. Participation has little meaning unless we, and particularly those of us in positions of power, allow others to 'take part', to set agendas, take decisions, manage and control resources. To allow the other in means to show him or her trust.

Table 1 Relationships between researchers and the grassroots poor and powerless

<i>Type of Research</i>	Researcher	Researched	Main goal	Level of reflexivity	Decision-making structures	Ownership	Resources	Recipients of information	Language	Overall nature
Survey	Expert	The poor	Objective facts	Zero/low	Top-down	Expert, Funding agency	Funding agency	Government, donors first, media possible	English Eng, Swa	Extractive
Top-Down Qualitative	Expert	The poor	Objective facts	Low	Top-down	Expert, Funding agency	Funding agency	Government, donors first, media possible	English Eng, Swa	Extractive
Extractive PRA	Expert	The poor	Objective facts	Moderate	Top-down	Expert, Funding agency	Funding agency	Government, donors first, media possible	English Eng, Swa	Extractive
Empowering PRA	Expert & the poor	The poor, the powerful, macropolicy	Objective facts, capacity built, social change	High	Bottom-up, and/or both	Expert, Funding agency, & the poor	Funding agency	The poor first, Government, donors next, media possible	Local lang., Swa - English - Eng, Swa	Transformative
Participatory Action	The poor	The powerful, macropolicy	Social change, capacity built	High	Bottom up	The poor	The poor, CSOs, funding agencies	The poor first, CSOs, networks, partners, funding agencies	Local lang Swahili English	Transformative

2.4 Participatory Action Research and Participatory Development

Participatory action research involves a reversal of power relations within the research process, as well as within different levels of society itself (Table 1).² Indeed, the main goal of the enterprise is social change, rather than the collection of information. The key actors are the poor themselves, often working through local grassroots CSOs. They set the research agenda, according to priority issues identified at the local level. Analysis tends to be holistic and in depth, in order to provide the kind of rich information needed for the tasks in hand.

Although outsider experts may be called upon to help facilitate the process, their tasks are defined by the grassroots actors through negotiation and debate. A bottom up decision-making structure is thereby established, which becomes a school for democracy in general. Ownership is held and claimed by the grassroots, and they often provide substantial resource support for the process. Having planned the research activity as part of their programme for social change, members of the community are highly motivated to participate, without the need for external incentives such as allowances, and will have a strong desire to analyse the findings.³ Hence, the separation between research and information dissemination breaks down, at one level, and becomes more complex on another. Grassroots groups will want to develop different kinds of information packages for advocacy purposes: media briefs, popular booklets, pamphlets and posters, on the one hand, but also expert reports for use in advocacy work with the policy makers in government and donor agencies.

Clarification of the meaning of empowerment makes sense here, drawing on earlier work in association with the UNICEF Child Survival, Protection and Development Programme (CSPD) and the Tanzania Gender Network Programme (TGNP) (UNICEF 1993, TGNP 1993). Empowerment in the context of transformation is understood to be a process which increases the capacity of the poor and disempowered to (TGNP 1993:29/30):

- Analyse and know the world at all levels;
- Act on their own behalf; and
- Increase their power and control over the resources necessary for sustainable and dignified life.

According to TGNP (1993:30), “The concept of empowerment connotes a process whereby a community (or a marginalised social group) increases its power, by challenging structures of society which disempower and removing the barriers to transformation. Both individual and collective action are called for to change power relations, often in several sectors at the same time.”

² The concept of ‘animation’ means the same thing in Tanzania these days, whereas in the 1970s and early 1980s, ‘participatory research’ was used, eg by the Jipemoyo Project and the Vocational Education Project of the CCT.

³ For discussion of how participatory approaches can enhance accountability of local government and service delivery see Cornwall, et al (IDS, 2000).

Participatory action research is highly associated with the concept of participatory development. The concept of *participatory development* takes explicit account of structures of inequality and power relations, and calls for transformation of decision-making processes *at all levels*, as shown by Rahman (1993) below:

- all segments of society have a voice in deciding what the key priorities/objectives of development will be
- all segments of society participate in making key decisions on the policies to be followed to reach these objectives
- at the level of implementation, all segments of society participate in deciding how to use means so as to reach given ends
- all segments of society benefit equally from development, in terms of access to and control over key resources at all levels of society
- special measures are adopted to overcome inequalities and disempowerment of the past, so as to enable specific disempowered groups (women, youth, pastoralists, the poor) to access resources and become full participants in development.

Participatory development recognises the need to build *popular social movements* for popular democracy. Political organisations -- not political parties which are defined here as state institutions -- need to be created and/or strengthened, which challenge the structures of power in place in politics, economics and culture. These organisations are *self-organisations*, led by members of a given interest group such as smallholder livestock-keepers, farmers, workers, marginalised youth or working women.

Building a popular democracy depends on a process whereby grassroots people become increasingly responsible for their own self-emancipation, through experience in organising themselves and struggling for their rights. Emancipation cannot be provided to the disempowered by, for example, an NGO that seeks to represent their interests -- this would be a continuation of the paternalistic missionary relationship which has fostered dependency attitudes and behaviour in the past.

The examples of community-based and community-led actions are increasing worldwide, especially in 'third world' countries of the South (Kaufman and Alfonso 1997, Morse et al 1995). New models of democracy have emerged, with real empowerment of people at the local level, in what has been referred to as "deepening democracy" (Wright 2000). Steps are taken to scale up from community to regional and/or municipality level, thus strengthening the voice of the poor in decision-making.

This does not mean external actors should exit from the scene. Rahman (1993) still sees a role for the outsider animator or participatory action researcher, mainly in *facilitation* of the research/action process (1993:paraphrasing 79-80, see box).

Crucially, in this view, research is one component of a dynamic process of social change. Knowledge generated fuels a process of collective analysis and action that includes

organizing to exert public pressure on authorities to ensure to ensure policy making and implementation is done in the interests of the poor. In this sense, research and action are integrally linked and cannot be separated. Researchers-animators engage with policy making and action at all levels, beginning with the community level.

The External Researcher as Facilitator

- Catalytic initiatives are taken by persons normally coming from the well-educated class, independent of macro social organisations such as political parties and government departments, to promote self-mobilisation of the disempowered for group or organised action, which emerges from their own deliberations
- The starting point is to encourage the disempowered to get together to find out why they are poor and oppressed through social investigation and analysis of their own, plus promoting their critical awareness of their environment and wider forces
- The disempowered are encouraged to discuss what they could do by uniting to overcome poverty and oppression; to form groups or organisations absolutely of their own, whose structure and functioning are to be decided by them, and through these to take economic and social action according to their self-deliberated priorities
- Attempts are made to generate a self-reliance consciousness among the disempowered and an attitude of *assertion* of their knowledge, views and decisions vis-a-vis outsiders. Materially, external resources and expertise are not considered to be primary in solving their problems - these are offered only as supplements, when needed and available, for the mobilisation of the people's own resources and skills. In the use of external resources, emphasis is placed on the further development of people's own resources and skills for them to achieve progressively greater self-reliance.
- The people are encouraged to meet periodically in camps or people's workshops to review their experiences, to undertake periodic fact-finding investigations of their environment, and to take decisions for subsequent action based on their own research thus conducted -- seeking thereby to generate a process of *people's praxis*, i.e. a progressive action-reflection rhythm.
- The people, once they have developed experience in mobilising and in organised action, are encouraged to stimulate and assist other disempowered people to start similar action, and to gradually form higher-level organisations by federating smaller ones, and to develop links with other organisations of this type.
- Dependence of the people on the initial catalysts is supposed to cease, through the generation and development of internal leadership, cadres and skills. This does not necessarily mean actual physical withdrawal of the catalysts from people's processes, but the people should within a reasonable time be able to carry on with their collective activities on their own, while a catalyst may continue his or her association with such processes and seek new roles in their progressive development.
- The initiators of such action have not only a practical but also a research interest, in generating and assisting such self-reliant people's processes. This includes a search for methodology of self-reliance-sensitive catalytic action, for a role for intellectuals in the development of people's praxis and people's power, and inquiry into the implication of such interaction for social transformation. This research, however, is subordinate to the people's collective interests as perceived by them, and to a commitment to protect information whose dissemination might be contrary to this interest.

It is true that both participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory action research are demanding of time and human resources, but they are not necessarily more costly than survey approaches. Surveys tend to be more costly by carrying out their activities in many locations, with a large sample of persons to be interviewed, a large number of research assistants, and costly statistical analyses. In contrast, participatory research is usually carried out in more depth in fewer locations, with a much smaller sample size. Moreover, the quality and depth of knowledge are extremely high. Having been fully involved in the generation of information, grassroots actors are in a position to make use of it immediately. They are more likely to be committed to whatever policy or action strategies emerge from an analysis in which they themselves have been a part.

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