

**RESEARCH, COMMITMENT AND ACTION:  
THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH**

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'The world of the everyday life of the oppressed is not merely a sphere of social reproduction, but is crossed over by numerous breaks and cleavages with the dominant order; and that although these points of rupture are most often contradictory or partial, they concern the most intimate and long lasting logic of the social struggle.'

Jose Nun, *The Rebellion of the Chorus*

'Sous le familier, découvrez l'insolite  
Sous le quotidien, décéléz l'inexplicable  
Puisse toute chose dite habituelle vous inquiéter  
Dans la règle découvrez l'abus  
Et partout où l'abus s'est montré  
Trouvez le remède'

Bertold Brecht, *L'exception et la règle*

**Abstract** – The author discusses the development and practice of participatory research as both a method and strategy of social investigation and social action within an adult education framework. Participatory research is compared with traditional research strategies, and its defining principles are outlined, together with specific examples of its application and practical issues both today and in the future.

## Introduction

Adult educators and community workers in many parts of the world have understood the substance of Nun and Brecht's well-articulated statements for many years. They have done so not because they have been full-time theoreticians or political philosophers, but because they have been working on a day-to-day basis with people who have been trying to *learn* in order to improve and control their own, and their communities', everyday life.

Because of the nature of adult education practice, it has always been a rich source for ideas, methods and strategies which have application to larger social movements. Participatory research is only one of the several such social innovations which have arisen in recent years.

Participatory research, as a term, was first used in Tanzania (Hall, 1978) as a practice; however, many people in various parts of the world either identified their own work with the concept or were stimulated by the ideas to begin developing work along similar lines. Beginning with a special issue of its journal, *Convergence*, in 1975, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) has encouraged people engaged in participatory research to work together and exchange ideas and information. A network was established in 1977 with coordinators in various parts of the world which has continued to function ever since. An up-date of network activities, issues and publications is available in another special issue of *Convergence* (*Convergence*, 1982).

For adult educators, non-formal educators, researchers concerned with implementation and action towards social or structural transformation, the combination of concepts which are brought together under the term participatory research remain fascinating, critical and controversial. Participatory research has most often been described as a three-pronged activity which integrates a research process (social investigation) with educational work through an action designed to deal with specific problems. It inevitably raises profound questions about the nature of *knowledge* (What is it? Who produces it? Why?); *education* (How? What for? By whom?); and *power* (What is it? How does one get it?).

Participatory research has arisen as a result of a combination of critiques and challenges. On one hand, the frustration of many social scientists and educators operating with positivistic and empiricist models of research, and on the other, educators and others seeking concrete ways to be engaged in education and action which works explicitly on behalf of oppressed and marginalized people.

Researchers, particularly in the Third World, had become disenchanted with research which purported to produce objective knowledge about people and social conditions while using methods which distorted that very real-

ity. The Third World was, and to some extent still is, filled with examples of expatriate or city-based highly trained researchers sending out questionnaires or conducting interviews with 'target groups' or other terms used to describe the exploited, oppressed or forgotten people. These questions, designed in the cities, or in the metropolitan country even, for purposes which people had not understood or asked for, were then taken away and 'analyzed' to be used in planning documents, individual career-oriented studies, or perhaps, in some cases, even abandoned. This kind of detached work created major distortions and misconceptions about the nature of the people who had actual, not hypothetical needs. Neither the work, nor the analysis, nor the use of results, was based on the direct involvement of the people concerned or produced any tangible or direct benefit for these people.

Educators, inspired in many parts of the world by the writings of Paulo Freire, were also seeking ways of working which strengthened the ability of the oppressed to resist political and cultural domination, while at the same time supporting attempts to transform the structures which created systematic injustice. We heard much about the myth of neutrality in education and can now find quite widespread support for a committed and engaged adult education, at least at policy or planning levels.

The kind of activities characterized as participatory research can be seen, therefore, as having arisen from:

- a. The engagement of many adult educators in the everyday lives of the people with whom they work.
- b. A critique of the role and methods of the most commonly used forms of research.
- c. An interest in educational forms which strengthened social movements and empowered people.
- d. An interest in contributing to an alternative base of knowledge which had its focus on the transformation of society.

## Underlying Principles of Participatory Research

The practice of participatory research has evolved, and is still evolving, a number of principles which serve as conceptual and practical tools.

1. Research should involve people in the entire process beginning with identification of the issues, through discussion of how to get the information, to analysis and use of results within the context of action.
2. Research should result in some direct and positive benefits for those communities and people involved.
3. Research is a process of systematic creation of knowledge which may or *may not* involve people who have been professionally trained as researchers.

4. Knowledge is deepened, enriched, and made more socially usable when it is produced collectively.
5. Research involves a combination of methods designed to facilitate social, cooperative, or collective production of knowledge.
6. Research, learning, and knowledge production are often aspects of the same intellectual processes in the context of action.

### **The Democratization of Research**

Still another way of seeing this work is in the context of increased democratic involvement in the research process. This is an obvious, but difficult intention. In a paper prepared for the 1979 Commonwealth Conference on Non-Formal Education, I outlined a number of trends towards the democratization of research (Hall, 1981). Reviewing these trends as part of the work in preparing this text has been discouraging. I would like to put forward these points, therefore, not necessarily as evidence that research is becoming more democratic, but as tendencies which need vigorous and intensified support if even modest gains are to be maintained.

#### *1. Shifts in the Location of the Research from Metropolitan Countries to the Third World*

In terms of the volume of research, numbers of persons engaged in research, and funds expended on research, the balance is still tipped heavily towards the richer nations and the international agencies in terms of the location where most research about non-formal education in Third World countries is initiated and carried out. There is, however, a quite general agreement that research really should be done by persons actually living and working in the countries where the education is taking place. The continuing delay in turning this task over completely is often said to be due to a lack of appropriately trained local researchers. Through the institutional push of organizations like the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat with their emphasis on 'TCDC' (Technical Cooperation amongst Developing Countries), the International Development Research Centre in Canada and SAREC (Swedish Research Agency in Developing Countries), and the ICAE's various programmes, in response to the political arguments in Third World countries, a growing emphasis has been placed on financial support to Third World researchers and research institutions.

#### *2. Shift from Expatriate to Local Researchers*

Related to, but lagging somewhat farther behind the question of the location of research, is the question of who actually does the work. The first stage in the democratization of research is to shift it to the place in question. The second stage is having someone from that country in control of the work. There is a general agreement and a visible tendency towards consolidating this second stage. More and more research in non-formal education is being done by the men and women in the country concerned, but there are very great national and regional variations in this. It is also true that some socially concerned expatriate researchers are more supportive than elite and dominant class nationals.

#### *3. Increased Involvement of Untrained Persons in Professional Roles*

The need to evaluate the results of the various literacy efforts associated with the UNESCO/UNDP literacy programme, and the many national efforts which have developed at the same time, has meant that many persons without formal training in the areas were recruited to work in research and evaluation units. In most cases it has been found that, after some experience, these untrained individuals have been able to carry out their work in a perfectly satisfactory way. In some cases these persons have proven to be much better than their colleagues with formal qualifications, especially in terms of working with local people or explaining why certain statistical results have emerged.

Another way in which untrained individuals have gained experience, and in a few places permanent status, as researchers, has been through the institution of the research assistant. It has been a common practice for years in most Third World countries for expatriate researchers to make use of local research assistants to do field work, given that expatriates do not usually have the language necessary to actually talk with local people. As anyone will tell you who has worked either as a research assistant or with one, these people very often have a better idea about the results than the formal researchers.

#### *4. Increased Interest in Making Research Accessible to Decision-Makers*

While too few research results or studies have found their way into a form which allows them to be used easily by policy-makers, there are some efforts to achieve this. When one talks of accessibility it most often refers to the

efforts to translate the reams of paper in a research report into the language and style of the upper level decision-maker: senior civil servants in various Ministries, or busy administrators in educational institutions.

This translation most often takes the form of short one- or two-page summaries of longer reports, or the form of seminars or workshops where the results are shared.

Another aspect of making research accessible which is not as common, but which must now be stressed, is increasing accessibility for the people whom research is most often about: the exploited, the poor, the landless and underschooled.

### *5. Increased Involvement of the Poor and Exploited in the Research Process Itself*

The movements of participatory research and related approaches such as action research and militant research have emphasized the importance of involving those persons whom the research is intended to benefit in the research process itself, from the identification of the problem to the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Examples of this approach can be found in several of the adult and non-formal education experiences including:

- Botswana:** – the evaluation of a cooperative weaving project;
- Kenya:** – village socio-economic analysis as the basis for literacy programmes;
- Tanzania:** – the analysis of grain storage problems for construction of storage silos;  
– the evaluation of literacy programmes;  
– the analysis of music in strengthening and transforming culture;
- Canada:** – the analysis of water usage and disposal based on community involvement in health issues in an isolated Indian community in Northern Ontario;  
– the development of a curriculum for English teaching in the workplace;  
– the analysis of housing problems in a working-class residential neighbourhood;
- England:** – the evaluation of the effects of the media in the English literacy campaign;  
– the analysis of learning needs in an urban working-class housing estate;
- India:** – planning education for poor industrial workers in New Delhi;

- literacy programmes in Udaipur;
- the development of women's clubs in Madras;

**Chile:** – farmers sharing the lessons they had learned in surviving outside the traditional agricultural market.

### **Practical Issues and Implications**

The experiences which have taken place to date have allowed us to identify a number of issues and implementations of participatory research of a practical nature. In some cases we have suggested some approaches and solutions. In other cases we have pointed out continuing difficulties.

#### *1. Use of Language*

One improvement which should be reinforced is to make sure that, at the end of any study, the materials are written up in a short and easy-to-read format for the attention of those persons who should know about the results. This takes a very short time to do and gives researchers practice in reading their own studies. Another step is the organizing of a seminar or workshop with the same persons where the results can be presented and the findings discussed. Some ministries and institutions now require the fulfilment of these requirements as part of the research contract.

The question of communication of interim results to the people with whom one works in a community in order to increase their participation in the research process is still another challenge. Assuming that a written form is useful at all, it is possible to put results in a local language and a form which most people understand. It is useful to look at other forms of popular communications which are already being used as models. Photo novels, newsheets, booklets, and brochures have all been used. A local committee can usually find an adequate way of getting the results into a usable form if they have been involved from the start.

#### *2. Use of Alternative Research Methods*

Perhaps one of the most dramatic shifts in research is the realization that research methods need not be limited to the paper-and-pencil styles that are most common. The involvement of non-literate populations in analysis has led to the application of a wide variety of other methods for group or collective analysis. Some of the methods which are now being used include:

- a. drawings which are either drawn or interpreted collectively (or both);
- b. still photographs, used similarly to drawings as codifications for in-depth analysis;
- c. people's theatre, when the community itself analyses structural relationships and portrays them in dramatic form;
- d. songs, collectively written or analysed;
- e. community meetings and/or dialogues;
- f. development of community self-portraits;
- g. video-tape recordings.

The focus on methodological aspects is growing rapidly. This does not of course invalidate methods which we have traditionally been using in research, but it has both pushed us to re-examine our methods for collective analysis and opened up the possibility for using a large number of methods which previously would not have been considered possible.

### 3. *Time Needed for Research*

While it is quite difficult to discuss this point in the abstract, it is fair to say that, in general, a research process which is truly democratic will take longer than the quick, one-off surveys to which we are more accustomed. It takes time to organize meetings, to explain objectives to different groups, have discussions about interim findings, develop the analysis, and discuss subsequent action. The balance of time spent in the village, or with the people, compared to the time spent in an office, is very much altered. This has obvious implications for language, type of person hired to do the work, costs, and the necessity of integrating the research process into other ongoing activities and actions. The counter-arguments, of course, are that an effective process is worth the time taken, and that in the long run the time taken may even be less because the research process combines an educational and action phase.

### 4. *Costs and Funding Patterns*

As noted above, increased time spent in a research process can have financial implications. It is true that while researchers and administrators are villagers or other working people to take time out to attend meetings, they must be highly motivated and quite certain that the efforts will bring some direct benefits. Some projects have begun to build in an amount of support for local participation, either directly or indirectly.

On the other hand, there are possibilities of keeping costs in research

should participate in the research process. How is it possible to assure that the research process serves those who need it most?

### 7. *The Blurring of the Distinction between Research, Learning and Action*

Participatory research is usually described as having three characteristics: it is at the same time an *approach* of social investigation, an *educational* process, and a means of taking *action*. This combination of characteristics has caused some difficulties in the academic world where reality has been divided into separate disciplines and fields of work.

When research involves a group of people in a common analysis and search for meaning it is the same thing as learning. This is not a problem in the workplace or the community where artificial separations have little meaning, but it does present some difficulties both for researchers and administrators who are trying to find where this kind of work fits into the official structure. In one concrete case, valuable participatory research programmes were put aside because the two administrative offices concerned could not figure out how to fund the work. The research agency said that what was being proposed was not research and so could not support the work. The educational agency said it was not education so that they could not support it either. To the people concerned it did not matter what it was called, but they were still delayed.

### **Conclusion**

Participatory research, like the other critiques of dominant research paradigms, such as those in science (see King, 1984 for an excellent review of the literature of alternative science policy), have achieved much visibility. There are hundreds of people who are working along these lines and still more who are sympathetic. Close links exist in many countries between the people who are engaged in these kinds of research, those active in the women's movement, the peace and human rights movement, movements for the rights of indigenous peoples, rural organizing and similar struggles. I believe that the ultimate fate of these so-called alternative visions is linked to the fate of all the larger social movements.

The strength and persistence of dominant forms of research cannot be underestimated. As Hans Weiler has noted,

down through a more democratic approach. If there are fewer professionally trained middle-class researchers involved, and more non-professionals involved, the savings can be quite appreciable. Further, if the research is incorporated into other local action programmes, the costs might be still more reduced.

### 5. *Balance between Grass Roots and Macro-Analysis*

While it is true that no-one intuitively understands the social reality of a rural village better than those who live there, there are nevertheless some facts about the control of life in those villages which are usually beyond the knowledge of those living there. If the cost of fertilizer is controlled by transnational corporations outside the village in some other country, then any analysis which involves fertilizer costs and usages will need to have some information about the ownership and price policies of the external producers and the relationship of the external producers to national or local suppliers.

The analysis of local problems must be linked to larger structural issues and the total analysis shared with those at the local level. In this way both the overall analysis is improved and the knowledge becomes a product which is jointly owned and produced.

### 6. *Use of Class as an Analytic Tool*

Concepts of social class and the relationships of various classes to the dominant mode of production are central to the process of understanding the effects of various educational programmes and the place which varying programmes hold within the overall socio-economic structure. While this concept has not played a prominent role in non-formal education research to date, the concern which we have for the rights of the poor is making the political economic viewpoint more common. If democracy implies involving the classes which have been excluded, then a class framework of analysis is useful.

More sophisticated and detailed work in the understanding of community class structures is needed. In an era when community participation is urged in every action and policy, we need to know more about the class structures within villages. We need to know more about the ways in which rich peasants maintain control and about ways to engage those in the village who are not as well off. How can non-formal education stimulate capital accumulation in the village? It is not enough to say simply that the community

'The transitional system of knowledge production is inextricably linked to a transnational system of power, in which publishing interests, research funding, consulting firms, testing services, professional associations and development assistance agencies all form part of a powerful – if less than perfectly coordinated – centre (Weiler, 1983, p. 21).

Within the context of a continuing and worsening global economic crisis, adult education is facing particularly hard times. The challenges to its funding are persistent and damaging. Participatory research is an approach which deserves closer scrutiny by more practitioners, more support by agencies and funders, more respect for its intentions and greater promotion of the advances made. Our ability to protect and defend ideas such as these which lie at the core of our value systems and traditions, is a barometer for the ability of all democratic and empowering social activities to survive, prosper and grow.

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**Zusammenfassung** – Der Verfasser bespricht die Entwicklung und die Praxis der partizipatorischen Forschungsweise sowohl als Methode und als Strategie der gesellschaftlichen Ermittlung und des gesellschaftlichen Handelns im Rahmen der Erwachsenenbildung. Die partizipatorische Forschungsweise wird mit traditionellen Forschungsstrategien verglichen, ihre formulierten Prinzipien werden zusammen mit spezifischen Beispielen ihrer Anwendung und deren Erträgen für die Gegenwart und in Hinblick auf die Zukunft umrissen.

**Résumé** – L'auteur présente et analyse le développement et la pratique de la recherche participative comme méthode et comme stratégie de l'investigation et de l'action sociale dans le cadre de l'éducation des adultes. La recherche participative est comparée aux stratégies traditionnelles de recherches, ses principes de base dégagés et des exemples spécifiques de son application donnés en même temps que les problèmes encourus aujourd'hui et pour le futur.

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