

Learning Material

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Social Research for Social Action: An Introduction

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Though claims are made about the objective and value-free nature of social research, in reality, oftener than not it leads to some form of social action, sometimes aimed at questioning the *status quo* and usually by maintaining it. In fact, social research and social action are similar and interdependent. Both entail human activity within a given human setting and feed each other. Social research is allied with social action though it may not always lead to it directly while social action is invariably based on some research. One can argue that even coercive and repressive social action entails a certain data-base as is evident from the deeds of investigative and police agencies all over the world. Studies have shown how aggressive marketing practices of multinational corporations, exploitation of the Third World markets and over-pricing are based on extensive research of their market potential and methods of making a given product acceptable to the consumer i.e., creating a need that does not really exist.¹

Apart from feeding one another, there is another common feature between traditional research and development-related social action. Both of them are top-down i.e., initiative is taken

¹Charles Medawar, *Insult or Injury? An Enquiry into the Marketing and Advertising of British Food and Drug Products in India and Malaysia* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981), pp. 40-46, 53-55 etc.

by the scholar in the case of research and by the bureaucratic decision-maker in the case of the development infrastructure. While the commercial, especially multinational, enterprises succeed in creating a need and selling their products since they aim at reaching a very small section of the population that can afford to buy their goods, the government-sponsored 'delivery systems' meant for the 'small man' have not reached the most needy. In fact, most of their benefits have been cornered by those who already had something.

Largely because of the elitist metropolitan model of development adopted by the Five Year Plans in India, with the concentration of investment and resources in the industrial or modern sector, there is a dual economy with dichotomous relationships between the urban and rural sectors, and, within the city, between the formal and informal urban sectors. This dual relationship may be conceptualised, as Wiebe does, in terms of a model of dominance and dependency but modified by certain patterns of reciprocity that function to the advantage of the urban poor within the overall framework of inequality and subordination.²

What is said here about the urban sector can be applied much more forcefully to the rural areas where a few landholding castes have been able to get most benefits of the 'delivery system'. One of the reasons for this is the type of research and evaluation systems that go into building up or modifying the infrastructure. Both can be called top-down: research or evaluation whose need is felt by the policy-maker and are based on a conceptual framework that aims at 'objectivity' which essentially involves distance between the people and the evaluator.³

After three decades of policy-maker-oriented development effort supported by scholar-oriented research, field workers as well as researchers are beginning to realise that knowledge thus generated has not resulted in removing poverty. Moreover, many scholars question the very concept of objectivity in social research. Some of them feel that

²Alfred de Souza, 'The Challenge of Urban Poverty: An Introduction,' in Alfred de Souza (ed.), *The Indian City: Poverty, Ecology and Urban Development* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), pp. xvi-xvii.

³Gunnar Myrdal, *Objectivity in Social Research* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1970), pp. 3-5.

there is an inescapable *a priori* element in all scientific work. Questions must be asked before answers can be given. The questions are all expressions of our interest in the world; they are at bottom valuations. Valuations are thus necessarily involved already at the stage when we observe facts and carry on theoretical analysis, and not only at the stage when we draw political inferences from facts and valuations.⁴

This book tries to tackle some of the questions arising out of this questioning among Indian development workers and researchers. Those who are unhappy with the traditional system because its outcome has been mostly scholarly papers that have led to little change are experimenting with alternative systems. This book brings together many such theoretical papers as well as case studies presented at a workshop on Participatory Evaluation, held at Ranchi in March 1981. The papers ask some fundamental questions about research itself and view people's participation in development and evaluation as essential if the obstacles to the growth of the weakest sections are to be removed. Research is viewed no more as an 'objective study' but as a process of liberation which begins with faith in the people and in their capacity to take their own decisions. The experiments in alternatives to the present system begin with the assumption that

the rural poor are 'voiceless' not because they have nothing to say, but because nobody cares to listen to them. More fundamentally, they constitute the silent majority because they have no 'say' in the decision-making structures of society. In this perspective it is legitimate to say that development begins with listening to the people. To accept this in actual practice is not easy, even for voluntary agencies in development.⁵

The main question scholars ask about the present research methods and the type of social action concern *distribution of power*, the assumptions about what constitutes *critical resources*, and linked to the above two and yet distinct in some way, the

⁴Gunnar Myrdal, *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), Preface pp. xv-xvi.

⁵H. Volken, 'An Experience of a Training Team in Rural India,' in *Moving Closer to the Rural Poor: Shared Experiences of the Mobile Orientation and Training Team* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1979), p. 21.

question of *control*. Moreover, there are questions concerning *technology* of social action or research, the type of personnel required and their *training* and finally, measurement of the *outcome*. The section on 'theoretical perspectives' has tried to tackle most of these questions.

(a) *Distribution of Power*

One of the most visible characteristics of traditional research is the remarkably skewed power distribution between the researchers and the so-called 'subject'. The researcher has complete power to decide upon the focus, methods and outcomes of his study.⁶ Similarly, top-down social action efforts are, almost by definition, characterised by concentration of power at the top. The elite decide what social action is good for the 'ignorant' masses, the strategies to make them known and methods to implement them. An analysis of most development projects in the 'Third World' would bear this out. Take for example, the 'Green Revolution'. This social action effort was conceived by the elites in the governments of the developing countries, mostly in consultation with their counterparts in the rich countries and international agencies. The farmers in the developing countries had relatively little power in the entire effort though the better off among them reaped its benefits, and of course, other sections of rural society, like the landless labourers, were completely ignored and in many cases their situation deteriorated.⁷

One may add that the 'Green Revolution' and other top-down programmes were fed and supported by massive traditional research carried out in agricultural and other research institutes of rich countries and their counterparts in the developing countries. The launching of these programmes, in their turn, created major funding opportunities for further support of traditional research in these institutions and generated a mutually supportive cycle of traditional research and top-down social action.⁸

⁶M. Brenner and P. Marsh, *The Social Contexts of Methods* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

⁷Francine R. Franckel, *India's Green Revolution—Economic Gains and Political Costs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 13-15, 24-26 etc.

⁸Sodhir Sen, *A Richer Harvest—New Horizons for Developing Countries* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 45-49.

In the very first paper, Tandon questions the assumptions of traditional research and social action, and the myths accompanying the 'objective' approach which assumes that human beings can be treated as objects of research just as the natural sciences deal with inanimate matter, plants or animals. Apart from the false assumptions about the possibility of such an objectivity, there is the ethical question of the distribution of power and the control exercised by a small minority over the 'silent majority' and the domination-dependency situation that ensues.

The alternative suggested by papers in this book is participatory social research and action which imply horizontal distribution of power. It means that power is the central theme of participation and that participatory social action entails widely shared, collective power by those who are considered beneficiaries. The people become agents of social action and the power differentials between those who control and need resources is reduced through participation. "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."⁹

(b) *Critical Resources*

Resources are another source of power and control. Both traditional research and top-down social action efforts rely heavily on resources external to the social setting they are focusing upon. In the case of research, the external scholar is the critical resource and no attempt is made to utilise the local people except as 'objects' of study whose results may be used by the decision-makers to further manipulate and silence this 'silent majority'.

Similarly, top-down social action projects, be they state-led or voluntary, rely heavily on external expertise, capital, know-how and equipment. In the case of the Green Revolution, for example, massive external inputs in the form of high-yielding seeds, fertilizers, implements like tractors and credit were critical resources and little effort was made to supplement them with internal inputs, leave alone build upon what was locally available.¹⁰

⁹A. Pearce and M. Stiefel, *Inquiry into Participation* (Geneva: UNRISD Discussion Paper, 1979), p. 3.

¹⁰Francine R. Franckel, *India's Political Economy 1947-1977—The Gradual Revolution* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 270-281.

An immediate result of these external inputs is heavy dependence on external personnel and neglect of the local brains. An example of such a situation is a World Bank Research Project in Egypt. In 1979, only two out of the six principal investigators were Egyptian, the rest being 'high standing World Bank officials with the required expertise and research experience. None of the five advisers comes from Egypt.'¹¹ Another example is a leprosy eradication project in a province of an East African country. 45% of the annual budget went for supporting eight European personnel, 22% on supporting 60 African personnel and only 1.5% on drugs.¹² A glowing example of external resources obtaining criticality!

Hence the question: what is the role of the external agent? The top-down system seems to lead to domination-dependency relations and accentuation of inequalities. Most papers in this book try to tackle this question. Fernandes studies the nature of people's participation in development and the role the external resources (personnel, institutions, funds, technology etc.) play in facilitating or hindering people's participation. Most case studies, especially the one of Mukkath and de Magry, try to study this aspect.

Most papers also try to understand the problem of control in research, training and the implementation of programmes. D'Abreo shows the role of training in building self-confidence among people. Fernandes shows how subtle modes of control can continue even within a programme that seems to involve the people fully. Saint tackles the problem of control of communication and the need of identifying and re-valourising popular systems of communication if there has to be total participation by the people. Dyal Chand and Soni show how illiterate women can grow into a viable organisation if their culture, modes of communication and techniques are respected and efforts made to build upon what they already have through their participation. The case studies by Singh as well as the Bero evaluation by Bogaert *et al.* give examples of how people have grown as a

result of an on-going process of action-reflection-action which started with faith in the people. Krishnamurthy examines the myths on which most top-down projects are based and further substantiates Saint's claim that the villagers evaluate all the external inputs and accept only what they consider rational.

All these achievements were made possible because the catalysts began with faith in the people and a belief that ordinary people can solve most of their developmental problems by utilising skills, experiences and available local resources. External resources play only a supportive role and are no more a source of domination and control.

(c) Technology

Both traditional research and the GNP-centred development pattern depend on expensive and sophisticated technology. Research methods take western models for granted. Apart from ethno-centrism underlying such an approach, one tends to agree with Mbilinyi *et al.* when they say:

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 techniques world-wide.¹³

One consequence of this sophistication is that what is called advanced technology has gone out of reach of the poor countries and as a result they have to depend on the universities, foundations and governments of rich countries, thus continuing expert-control of peoples and domination-dependency situation between countries and between groups within a country. Training of Third World personnel in the rich countries perpetuates this situation. What Kaplan says about Latin America is probably true also about the rest of the Third World. He claims that American 'influence has been brought to bear through the training

¹³Mbilinyi *et al.*, *op. cit.* p. 5.

¹¹Marjorie Mbilinyi *et al.*, *The Politics of Research Methodology in Social Sciences* (Morogoro, (Tanzania): Lead paper at the African Regional Workshop on Participatory Research, July 1-7, 1979), p. 31.

¹²Glyn Roberts, *Questioning Development* (London: Returned Volunteer Action, 1977), p. 19.

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.¹⁴

Shiva and Bandyopadhyay discuss the consequences of this situation on local knowledge and technology. They show how acceptance of the concept of modernisation can be fatal to centuries-old knowledge and resources which are often irreplaceable. They also discuss cases of popular movements that began with knowledge available among the people. However, given that the anti-people policies are formulated by those who understand only the language of macro-research, they insist on the need of subsuming popular knowledge in the language of the decision-makers not in order to support these decisions and find ways of making them acceptable as scholars have often done, but in order to change these anti-people policies. Such elitist policies are the result of the decision-makers' attitudes. Most of them think of people only as recipients of aid and are not prepared to accept the possibility of genuine knowledge among them.

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...¹⁵

The technology of participatory social action is embedded in the local context and people's models of design and implementation. In other words, participatory research and action affect both the type of technology and the methodology of evaluation as well as action, as Srinivasan points out in her paper. As Shiva and Bandyopadhyay insist, the technology of such action is small and appropriate and is built upon what has come down over the centuries. The cases mentioned by them, as well as those of the Pachod programme, the Madhya

¹⁴ Marcos Kaplan, 'The Vulnerability of Social Science Research in Latin America,' in E. Crawford & S. Rokkan (eds.), *Sociological Praxis* (London: Sage, 1976), p. 151.

¹⁵ Glyn Roberts, *op. cit.* n. 10

Pradesh tribals and the Working Women's Forum illustrate the effectiveness of such an approach. These and other cases such as the training methodology mentioned by D'Abreo and the modes of communication elaborated upon by Saint show that while participatory social action entails small and relevant technology, it is also based on modes of change which are evolved by the participants.

(d) Outcome

The major difference between the traditional and participatory approaches is seen in their outcome. Unlike the traditional approach which is concerned with quantitative outcomes and goal-directed action, participatory research gives greater importance to qualitative data and process-oriented action. The success of research is seen no more in publications in 'reputed' journals but in what happens during the process of research. Similarly, the outcomes of participatory social action are no more measured as in the top-down approach, in quantitative, aggregate terms like per capita income, GNP, birth and death rates. When there is genuine people's participation, the outcomes concern human beings in qualitative terms. It is a process of growth as a community and would lead to people's organisation in some form or the other.

Self-confidence is another important outcome of some participatory social action efforts. The Scheduled Caste women of Pachod or the Bhil tribals of Umara gained self-confidence after their participation in their own training, in wage negotiations with the contractor or in working together.

Linked to self-confidence and awareness is the educational outcome of participatory social action. The participants of such an effort learn new ways of perceiving reality and acting on it. The Chipko or Bedthi movements are examples of a new type of education taking place among persons who are ordinarily considered ignorant. This action, if followed by proper reflection, can bring about collective empowerment and strength for future actions, as most case studies show.

In other words, the final outcome of participatory research is participatory action which is characterised by an equal distribution of power, reliance on local resources, continued control

by the people, small and locally evolved technology, and processual, qualitative, human outcomes.

(e) *Micro and Macro-Research*

To the extent that what are mentioned above are important elements of the emerging paradigm of participatory and professional research at the micro and macro-levels, just as top-down social action and research go hand in hand, it is necessary that participatory social research develops characteristics that make possible its alliance with participatory social action. What is more, as the final Statement of the Workshop says, it should be made possible for traditional research to support participatory social action, by subsuming knowledge of the people to the macro-level and translating it in the language of the policy-makers.

Simultaneously, macro-researchers have to build up what some have called the social capital of local institutions, education, values and other aspects, that can enable people to gain greater control over their environment and improve their material circumstances at every crossing of 'cultural thresholds'.¹⁶ This requires that the knowledge available to macro-researchers should be translated in the language of the common man. Thus the macro-researcher has to play the double role of subsuming popular knowledge to the professional's language in order to change policies and to translate the outcome of macro-research into popular language.

In many cases this has borne fruit. At the international level, for example, the micro-studies translated into macro-language have enabled organisations like UNICEF to realise that

the top-heavy conventional approach to making town and country better places to live in has not gotten most of the population of the developing countries very far. Only 10% of these people have access to decent health care.... This state of affairs obviously calls for something else, something that can happen now and make a big difference soon to the very many.¹⁷

¹⁶David G. Mandelbaum, 'Anthropology and Challenges of Development,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15(n.44, November 1, 1980), p. 1899.

¹⁷Gordon Carter, 'The Implications of Basic Services,' *Assignment Children*, (n. 41, Jan-March, 1978), pp. 16-17.

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From this re-thinking was born the concept of what are called the basic needs. However, many feel that even this approach stops at material needs and does not go far enough to solve the genuine human problems and lead to true human development.

Some others feel that far from helping the process of liberation, if the researcher is not careful, he may only enable the traditional policy-makers or vested interests to present their goods in a more attractive package without changing their substance. Paulo Freire, for example, inspired many groups in their work of liberation.

He also attracted the attention of those agencies that were developing an educational methodology for the incorporation of the small peasant into the consumer economy under the auspices of the Integrated Rural Development Strategy. These agencies found in Freire's terminology a progressive gloss which could make their approach marketable in the Third World. By co-opting Freire's terminology and concepts, they could hope to influence the direction of political change in the Third World.¹⁸

While facilitating the empowerment of the marginalised groups, the macro-researcher has to counteract these efforts at co-opting by encouraging new trends and supporting genuine action.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the role and nature of traditional as well as participatory research and action. We can now comment on its implications. The foremost implication for participatory social research is its clear attempt at power equalisation, by eliminating the distinction between the researcher and the people. This power equalisation assumes that research becomes an action-reflection-action process of interaction between the outsider who functions no more as a scholar but as a catalyst, and the local people.

¹⁸Ross Kidd & Krishna Kumar, 'Co-opting Freire—A Critical Analysis of Pseudo-Freirean Adult Education,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (n. 1 & 2 January 3-10, 1981), pp. 27-28.

From this it follows that the critical resources in the process are the people who are capable of contributing ideas, information, insights, analysis and above all, provide the context for the inquiry. An essential result of this approach is that the control over the entire process of research and action has to be shared by the 'expert' researcher and the people, with the former playing only a supportive role to the latter.

In other words, it is essentially people's research and entails a framework that evolves from the local context and technology that is small and appropriate. Methods of data-collection and analysis should contribute towards an understanding of micro-situations in their macro-contexts.

Finally, research has to lead to action. The 'traditional and still conventional tendency in social research to be 'pseudo-objective' and to conceal the value premises in a particular approach'¹⁰ has to give place to purposeful study geared to the people becoming change-agents. The knowledge and learning outcomes are no more confined to the researcher 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 group. This makes more complex demands on participatory research and evaluation.