



# Issues to Consider

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## Goals

As we have seen, participatory research can lead to a broad range of results, including:

Acquiring skills: research, technical, training, analytical.

Developing appropriate technology for meeting local economic needs.

Producing materials: research reports, training manuals, curriculum materials, audio-visual materials, blueprints for action.

Structural analysis: making connections between personal and/or local situations and their broader historical national and international context.

Building organizations for further action: committees, cooperatives, local, regional, national, international networks.

Political action.

Dissemination of the participatory research approach.

Results vary a great deal according to the particular conditions under which the work is carried out. Many factors may influence results:

Sources of funding and personnel.

Which interest groups in the constituency are involved in the research.

Length of time of the project.

Political consciousness of the groups involved at the start of the project.

Political and economic conditions—degree of repression and oppression.

Point in community action in which participatory research is adopted.

Primary activity of the project—investigation, analysis or action.

Who initiates the project—someone within the community or someone from outside.

The particular focus of participatory research at any one time depends on the specific conditions experienced by the group or community who undertake it. The ability of a group to decide what activities and goals are realistic is critical to the entire process.

Since not everything can be accomplished at once, it is best to think in terms of short-term and long-term goals.

A short-term objective of participatory research is to produce a collective understanding of the local situation which can lead to action on problems directly and immediately affecting participants in the research effort. While working to meet immediate needs, participants may find that by learning and acting together, they can create the power to make changes in their social conditions.

It is important, through frequent reflection and evaluation, to make sure that the method of meeting immediate needs doesn't interfere with the long-term goals of the constituency.

With time, there may be movement from a focus on immediate needs in the constituency to collective analysis and action at a broader level of society—the whole village, or organization, or union, or region or nation.

### Control

Participatory research is a tool which oppressed people can use to begin to take control of the economic and political forces which affect their lives. Control of the participatory research process itself by the participants is one important step toward empowerment. Control ensures that the new knowledge created arises from their own experience, relates to their perceived needs and is used for their own benefit.

Participants already have valuable knowledge. They do not start from zero in the process. People have, after all, traditionally survived on the basis of knowledge created by investigation into their environment. However, they engage in participatory research because they want to advance their knowledge about some aspect of their social lives and/or physical environment in order to improve living conditions.

The participatory research approach enables participants to discover how things work in their own world by deciding what questions to ask, how to gather the information and how to organize the information according to criteria which are important to them. At the same time, the process of research is demystified and participants realize that they can often do the same kind of work that so-called experts do.

The new knowledge may be used within the constituency for its own internal self-education. It may, however, be necessary to share information and in other ways to communicate with the larger society. In particular, this is necessary when a constituency needs

financial and/or political support from sympathetic groups within the larger society as well as from government institutions. The choice, however, should be up to the constituency.

### **Role of the Participatory Researcher**

Groups and communities often work together with people from outside who have special skills—as researchers, educators, organizers and/or technicians. The initiative, in fact, frequently comes from outside the constituency. They may accept the initiative because the project offers skills and services which they want and need.

When you begin participatory research, whether you are from outside the constituency or belong to it, you and the local group should discuss your respective roles, reach agreement on clear terms of reference for yourselves and ensure local interest, control and direction in the project.

As a participatory researcher, you need to be aware of certain qualities, skills, knowledge and attitudes which will promote local control and contribute to expanding the participation of local people in all stages of the research process:

(1) A willingness to deepen your knowledge of the local and greater situation by constant observation, listening, questioning, discussion and analysis.

When possible, you should live, eat and work with the local people. This is a good way to learn about their concrete conditions. It is also an important way to become aware of indigenous patterns of communication and decision-making, indigenous technologies and other local resources already in place and available as a foundation for participatory research.

(2) A growing understanding of the political, social and economic situation at the local level and its national and international context. This is important in order:

To know whom you are working with in the constituency—the most oppressed or elites whom it is easier to reach.

\*Laedza Batanani, the popular theater program in Botswana, found that their campaigns reflected the viewpoints and interests of government extension workers and cattle owners rather than the poorer majority of rural people who did not own cattle.

\*The grain storage project in Bwakira Chini took special measures to reach the poorer peasants in addition to the elite peasants who had already adopted modern technology.

To be able to facilitate study of root causes of local problems among the people you are working with.

To understand the constraints within which the participatory research must be conducted.

(3) A willingness to be self-critical and to seek out and be open to criticism from the constituency. You may, unwittingly, make assumptions about a group that are false. You may fall into a style of working that is inappropriate for the participatory process, especially if the local people regard you as an expert and treat you with reserve or deference.

Male activists working with women labourers in the educational camp in India realized that a deep-seated male chauvinism was expressed in seemingly small comments and attitudes. They constantly attempted to correct this tendency. They also found that in study circles they sometimes failed to decide topics of discussion together with the women, thus wasting valuable time on unnecessary or inappropriate topics.

(4) An ability to ask critical, hard questions while leaving the final decisions up to the constituency. Hopefully, you can bring a fresh perspective to the problem at hand through technical know-how, analytical skills, knowledge of the structural context within which local problems occur, etc. It is important to ask whether short-term plans will lead to long-term goals.

(5) A commitment to long-term, frequent involvement with the constituency. This is the only way to be a truly responsible, equal participant in the process of investigation and action. Fundamental social change cannot be carried out according to an exact timetable.

(6) A commitment to sharing the risks of reaction from and repression by those in power that a participatory research process may lead to. A person who leaves when the going gets rough is certainly irresponsible and very likely a danger to the community.

(7) A commitment to transferring your skills to members of the constituency, where appropriate. We need to demystify the role of the outside expert and demonstrate that participatory research and technical skills are things that local people can learn. It is necessary, of course, to negotiate an appropriate division of labour. There may be activities which local groups do not want to take responsibility for in the short-term. For instance, people who are not accustomed to doing much writing may not want to use their limited time and resources writing reports in the format required by funding agencies.

(8) A commitment to making the interests of the constituency a priority over your personal interests (such as writing a book, making money, advancing a career), the interests of the academic and scientific community and the funding bodies themselves.

You may have to play a delicate role in facilitating negotiations between the constituency and powerful outside interests. It is easier to ensure accountability to the constituency if you are employed directly by it, but this is not always possible.

### **Training**

Training is extremely important for participatory researchers. Necessary for learning and/or strengthening skills in the various methods of participatory research, training sessions are crucial for developing an accurate analysis of the social, economic and political context of the community, upon which effective action ultimately depends.

Ideally, training should be an on-going process, during which practitioners come together periodically to reflect on their field experience. This is a time when new information can be added to the process of analysis through discussions with other people, impressions and assumptions can be confirmed or rejected, and the next steps for investigation, analysis and action can be planned.

Training sessions also provide an opportunity to transfer skills to local people.

### **Participatory Evaluation**

Periodic and systematic evaluation promotes empowerment among participants in participatory research. The constituency can learn from previous experience so that in the future better structures can be developed to:

Increase democratic participation in and control of the process of investigation, analysis and action.

Achieve the intended product of the work, such as new technology or acquisition of land, or literacy.

Self-evaluation can be carried out by the constituency as a learning process. Constituents may, however, prefer to work with an outside consultant who can suggest ways of systematizing the inquiry. The outside consultant can also provide perspective on the project and contribute to the learning process by asking challenging questions that may not occur to those directly involved.

It may be necessary to work with an outside evaluator when the purpose of the evaluation is accountability to a funding agency. In this case, both the constituency and the evaluator need to ensure that the process of evaluation and the information generated are controlled by the constituency. Funding agencies may support the principle of constituency participation and control, but evaluations for accountability usually focus on quantifiable cost-benefit indicators of concrete results. Evaluation for accountability can also be a learning process for the constituency and, of course, the same information may be of use to both parties.

Participants and outside evaluators can structure the evaluation so that:

Different information is collected and/or selected to meet the needs of different audiences—the participants, the funding agency, the government, the general public.

Participants learn the skills of evaluation from outside evaluators.

Ideally, evaluation should be planned to take place throughout a project, covering these broad areas:

**Beginning:** Clarify objectives; set up record-keeping systems; file key documents; record decisions and their rationale.

**Middle:** formative evaluation—What is going wrong? What is going right? What needs to be changed? Review funder-project relations, if any.

**End:** Summative evaluation—lessons learned; achievements; failures; recommendations for the future. If the objective has not been achieved, why not? Was the goal unrealistic? Were strategies for achieving it unrealistic or inappropriate?

### **Obstacles and Limitations**

The problems which are the focus of a participatory research process grow out of the history of the people involved—their active experiences and their real social needs. These may be responses to specific social, economic or political crises or they may be of a more

## QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

### INITIATION AND CONTROL

WHO INITIATES?

WHO DEFINES THE PROBLEM?

WHO PAYS?

### CRITICAL CONTENT

WHAT IS STUDIED?

WHY?

BY WHOM?

### COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS

HOW IS INFORMATION GATHERED?

BY WHOM?

HOW IS DATA ANALYSED? BY WHOM?

### LEARNING AND SKILLS DEVELOPED

WHAT IS LEARNED?

WHO DEVELOPS WHAT SKILLS?

WHAT ARE THE PRODUCTS AND BY-PRODUCTS?

### USES FOR ACTION

HOW ARE RESULTS DISSEMINATED?

WHO USES THEM? HOW ARE THEY USED?

WHO BENEFITS?

day-to-day nature. Examples in the Introduction have taken place in a wide variety of political environments (some of which are extremely repressive), in a broad range of social, economic and cultural situations, and within very different organizational structures. Each has encountered obstacles to accomplishing both short-term and long-term goals. This is not surprising. The shift from investigation and learning to successful social action, and from small-scale social change to major structural change are the hardest to make. This is the reality of social change.

Participatory research is often initiated by people from outside the constituency who have technical expertise of one kind or another or by a small and relatively skilled leadership within the constituency. It is not easy to transfer organizational, technical and analytical skills to all people within the group or community involved. How successful "trainers" are in transferring these skills has implications for the degree to which the participatory research process is controlled by the people themselves.

A major obstacle to the goals of participatory research is, of course, the very power of the dominant forces. Domination takes the form of ideological oppression which permeates all social institutions and shapes the ways in which we think. It is sometimes exercised by sheer brute force. As researchers, educators and organizers we face it at a daily level in the financial and bureaucratic control that is exercised at many points in a process of social action. Participatory research is often undertaken in the form of projects funded by government agencies, academic institutions or community development agencies which represent the interests of those in power. We must work within the practical limitations of available funds, reporting deadlines and the time constraints of relatively short-term funding. It is a strategic choice to use institutional resources for work aimed at social change. It will take strategic planning and organization to overcome institutional control.

Major social change depends on the struggles of strong social movements. Although the work of participatory research has been interdisciplinary and field-based, a great deal of the activity has taken place within the broad areas of adult education. Communication and cooperation need to be established and strengthened among those with skills in participatory research and community activists who have skills in organizing and mobilizing. Each can learn from the other; in fact the challenge of participatory research is for us to be both educators and organizers/mobilizers.

The democratic approach of participatory research can strengthen existing social movements as well as contribute to building new popular organizations. Many of the groups using participatory research are linked with social movements, such as peasants and landless labourers, industrial workers, women's groups and Indigenous Peoples. These links need to be encouraged in participatory research work. The potential for participatory research within a community or an organization or a workplace will be limited if it is not associated with a movement that can challenge economic and political power at the local, national and/or international level. Only social and political movements can mobilize resources and promote investigation, analysis and action on a large scale. We need to find ways to improve communication with activists at these levels as well.

