

Participatory Research as a Contribution to Cultural Reconstruction*

RAJESH TANDON

Introduction

Participatory research is a growing methodology around the world. Its practice and conceptualization is continuously enriching the methodology. New experiences, projects, meetings and publications are being generated in various underdeveloped areas of the world. And the struggle of oppressed and marginalized people to regain their collective identity and to improve the quality of their lives provides the arena for the utilization and development of participatory research itself. Very few efforts are known to have been made so far to utilize participatory research methodology to deal with the problem of cultural reconstruction. In this chapter, I will attempt to outline key characteristics of participatory research as we have understood them and to explore its contribution to the problem of cultural reconstruction.

Characteristics of Participatory Research

Participatory research is characterized by the following:

1. Participatory research is based on the realization that knowledge is increasingly a major source of power and control. The cult of the expert is a major phenomenon of our times. Under the guise of expertise and specialization, we have created a situation where outside, faceless experts are increasingly determining our fate. The historical practice of local control and autonomous collec-

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tive 'commune' has been substantially eroded. The validity of any knowledge, plan or action is to be certified by an "expert."

Participatory research promotes analysis of their own situation by a group of ordinary people themselves. In this process of analysis, the questions and concerns of ordinary people receive attention, not those deemed necessary by the experts. People acquire and generate their own knowledge in order to act in their own interest.

2. Thus acquisition and generation of knowledge in participatory research is linked to the peoples' need for taking action. The ultimate objective of creating this knowledge is to plan and implement actions which the group of people involved in this effort consider appropriate to their own interests. The processes of data collection, analysis and reflection help to make decisions regarding the given situation.
3. As a process of analysis and reflection, participatory research facilitates collectivization. It is a collective process, not carried out by separate individuals in isolation from each other. Hence, it can be effectively utilized to promote collective efforts to solve a given problem that is considered important by that collectivity. It also facilitates the process of bringing people together such that together they reflect and, perhaps, together they act.
4. Participatory research recognizes the value and validity of people's experiences. The experiences and knowledge presently possessed by ordinary citizens can themselves be a basis for more comprehensive and valid knowledge. It does not imply that scientific knowledge can not be utilized by ordinary people. In fact, the scientific-technical knowledge regarding the Phlegraen fields in Pozzuoli is an important contribution to enhance people's knowledge, but not to replace it.
5. Finally, participatory research provides the opportunity to ordinary citizens to make connections between their personal reality and larger social reality. This linking up process between micro experiences and macro dynamics generates the kind of understanding which can then constitute a valid basis for future actions.

This is what creates a sense of empowerment among ordinary people. The methodology of participatory research empowers ordinary citizens by enhancing their knowledge, by improving their analytical and planning abilities, and by mobilizing a sense of

collective self-confidence. Empowerment then implies a shift from the position 'I cannot' to the position 'we can'! overcoming apathy, alienation, cynicism, powerlessness and helplessness is the critical empowering process. And participatory research is most clearly and directly characterized by this process of empowerment.

Seen in this perspective, participatory research can then be a contribution to mobilization, education and empowerment. It facilitates the mobilization of ordinary people around a given issue, it informs and educates them about the issue, and it collectively empowers them to do something about that issue. It is these characteristics of participatory research which make it unique, complex and yet valuable.

Implications for Cultural Reconstruction

Given the above characteristics of participatory research, what are its implications for cultural reconstruction in general and in Pozzuoli in particular? In this section, I will briefly enumerate my understanding of the possibilities and processes of utilizing participatory research as a contribution to cultural reconstruction.

Understanding the Crisis

One of the first things necessary to reconstruct is to understand the current crisis. The crisis created by a continuous state of emergency in the Commune of Pozzuoli needs to be clearly understood. The causes underlying this crisis are as crucial for understanding as the consequences of this crisis on the people—social, economic, cultural.

The first step, therefore, appears to be bringing major stakeholders together to generate this shared understanding of the crisis. These stakeholders could be representatives of various neighbourhoods, ordinary citizens, experts, political, cultural and religious leaders, etc. The criterion for selecting the people should essentially be who are affected most by the crisis. Providing relevant technical information regarding the causes of this crisis and sharing its consequences on various stakeholders are the starting points for developing a common and shared understanding.

Discovering Historical Roots

Participatory research can facilitate the process of historical discovery by people. It is important to reflect upon the cultural roots of people in a historical perspective. This historical discovery of cul-

tural roots can provide the basis for future reconstruction. In this context, people's culture has to be seen as a historically continuous and continuing process—a dynamic collage of values, norms, symbols and expressions, not something static at a given point in time.

The methodology of participatory research has been used to facilitate this process of self-discovery of one's own culture. Photostories, oral-histories, video documentations, personal narratives, reflection on stories, songs and art have all been effectively used in different settings to facilitate this process of discovery. These methods should be used selectively with various stakeholders, and with both individuals and groups, in order to have the maximum utility.

Visualizing the Future

Based on the understanding of the current crisis and a historical discovery of culture, it is then possible to visualize a desirable future. What are the cultural elements that should characterize that future? Which of those cultural elements already exist in our history? Which new elements are needed? What is the nature of education that will enhance the desirable future? These issues are important aspects of visualizing the future. And these demand a look into the future—a look ahead—with all its uncertainties and ambiguities. But it is crucial for any kind of reconstruction, as the plans for cultural reconstruction have to emerge from this futuristic perspective.

Participatory research process can contribute to this task of visualizing the future only to the extent of assisting people to search for alternatives based on their preceding analyses. This search process can be facilitated by the methods of participatory research.

Generating Commitments to Reconstruction

Finally, generating desired commitment among ordinary citizens to reconstruct that desirable future is also important. Such cultural reconstructions are not possible through experts alone or through administrative actions. Citizens' participation is critical for reconstruction. And commitment is necessary to promote and sustain this participation. If the preceding steps have been able to create a sense of ownership and control by ordinary people, it is possible that they may develop the kind of commitment needed for this cultural reconstruction.

In essence, participatory research is based on the principles of ownership and control to be exercised by ordinary people. And, therefore,

it should be the ultimate contribution of participatory research. The availability of information, feedback of that information to people's actions are key methods of ensuring ownership and commitment. The more people decide themselves, the more committed they would feel.

Conclusion

In this brief chapter, I have tried to highlight salient characteristics of participatory research and its potential contribution to cultural reconstruction. The challenges faced by Commune di Pozzuoli are complex and tough, and it is not going to be easy to find appropriate and lasting solutions. The methodology of participatory research can make a small contribution through mobilization, education and empowerment of ordinary people. Yet, it is only a small contribution, and it should not be seen as a panacea. It is as important to keep in view its limitations, as its potential.

Select Bibliography

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