

MS-10 (2)

✓

NETWORKS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR STRENGTHENING
ADULT EDUCATION MOVEMENT

ed-91

RAJESH TANDON

JULY 1987

SOCIETY FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN ASIA
45, SAINIK FARM, KHANPUR, NEW DELHI-110062

CONTEXT

The last decade has been a significant one in modern human history in many ways. A large number of socio-economic and political problems facing humanity have surfaced dramatically: hunger, famine, illiteracy, war, apartheid, ecological degradation, exploitation of women, etc. The response of the World Community to these problems can be categorized in two broad streams. The first, more widespread and resource-packed response has been from the governments -- of the South and North, and inter-governmental institutions. This response has been largely inadequate in solving any of the above problems, despite backed by massive resources and large delivery mechanisms comprising of administrative frameworks and organizations. The second response, more humble and sparse, less resourceful and visible, sporadic, intermittent, has come from what has broadly come to be called the Non-governmental sector -- individuals, groups, small organizations. These are students and teachers; church and temple inspired philanthropists; grass-roots educators in villages and barrios; voluntary organizations, research and training institutions; individual activists, trade unionists, professionals (lawyers, engineers, doctors, nurses, etc.) -- a whole range of ordinary people in our countries.

Though scarcely funded, poorly managed, infrequently coordinated -- and facing a variety of other problems -- this second response to highlight, define, analyse and articulate, as well as to act on, the pressing human problems of the present has been somewhat more effective. What have been the reasons for this difference ?

Besides personal motivation and commitment of those involved in the second type of response, a major reason for difference appears to be in the manner in which the non-governmental community, by and large, functions. The central thrust of this second type of response is based on faith in ordinary people, in their concern for and capacity to solve major problems faced by them. It is this faith in ordinary people that has led to the creation of innovative forms of working on problems. 'Network' as a form has arisen in this context.

NETWORK

In addressing and confronting pressing problems of our times, we have historically learnt to create certain mechanisms to help us accomplish those goals. "Organization" as a conceptual and legal form, particularly the Weberian form, has acquired salience at present.

But an organisation assumes unity of structure and command, as well as an identity of goals. When different parties who share a common vision and ideology want to come together on specific common problems, they need not create an "organisation" -- they can maintain their autonomous character and yet come together on issues of common interests. Such short term as well as long term linkages and coalitions can take the form of Network.

What is a network? It is clearly different from an organisation. In one important way, it does not have a hierarchy. It does not have a unity of structure, that somebody is chairman, somebody is secretary and somebody is something else. It is a concept of engineering. It essentially implies free flow of information, ideas and resources between members without any established hierarchy or structure.

Thus Networks across regions, areas and locations, across issues, concerns and ideas have emerged all over the world. And they seem to grow in strength and number.

THE RELEVANCE OF NETWORK

A Network can be utilized for a variety of purposes, many of them simultaneously. Different networks have been used for different purposes. In what ways can we assess the relevance of a Network?

1. The existing institutional framework in the dominant system tends to limit raising of issues and identifying of concerns. The dominant organizational framework tends to structure what issues can be raised and discussed. Unlike such organisational settings, a Network has

the potential to operate outside the dominant institutional framework and thereby become a vehicle for identifying, articulating and discussing issues of major concerns. For example, when the ideas of Participatory Research were first mooted more than a decade ago, it was impossible to raise a critique of traditional research methodology inside universities and institutes of research. A Network at that time proved an effective vehicle to overcome the dominance of the established research enterprise.

2. Newer ideas, visions and perspectives can be elaborated and sharpened through the Network. The 'cutting-edge' requires a Network as a mechanism for elaborating new concepts and ideas. This is largely because new ideas entail a critique of and departure from the established modes. The existing institutional framework tends to curtail such possibilities. Thus Network can become an alternative arena for elaboration of newer ideas. The methodological innovations in Participatory Research, for example, were made possible only because of the availability of a Network.

3. In the situation of institutionalized politics and repression, grass-roots efforts towards education, and organization of the poor and social change inevitably invite retaliation from the vested interests. This retaliation takes three forms: overt repression (violence), negation and cooption. In all these situations, a Network can be seen as a political strategy for dealing with such retaliation. The existing institutional mechanisms fall short of providing the kind of support and protection for grass-roots activists required in the face of retaliation. The history of Participatory Research Network is full of instances where local national, regional and international support and solidarity action was mobilised in the face of repressive retaliation from the vested interests. Whether it is illegal detention of German Mollina in Chile, Mahmood Mamdani in Uganda, Carl Gaspar in Philippines, Vincent Cheng in Singapore, or denial of basic rights to victims of Bhopal gas disaster, the network of Participatory Research acted swiftly and decisively in support, with some positive results.

4. Many countries and situations of the South are experiencing increasingly diminishing democratic space and functioning at various levels. This is throughout all political institutions, organizations, administrative structures and society at large. A Network can become a relevant strategy for resisting such attempts to narrow, and at the same time working towards expanding, the democratic space and functioning in a given, local, national, regional and international situation. The struggle of voluntary sector in India, human rights groups in Chile, South Africa and South Korea, workers in Malaysia, Philippines and India for maintaining democratic rights and expanding democratic space, freedom of expression and right to dissent have been supported and strengthened through a variety of Networks.

5. In many of our countries, individuals and small groups though motivated and interested to work for the poor, find themselves entrapped in dominant institutions for essentially material reasons. Their energy and creativity gets sapped in those institutions, making them fossilized over an extended period of time. A Network can be utilised to identify, encourage and revitalise such individuals and small groups in support of the cause of social transformation. Through the Network of Participatory Research, we have been able to link up with a large number of individuals who were otherwise unable to contribute to the cause as they were working in a government department or academic institution. Their frustration and cynicism has been turned into a positive force by providing the access of a Network.

6. A Network is a valuable mechanism for exchange of information, experiences and visions across cultures, systems, countries and continents. The existing practice and theory of organisation and institutions is unable to cope with the requirements of large, rapid and flexible movement of ideas, experiences and information to be brought to bear on issues of common concern. A Network has the capacity to transcend

limitations of boundaries created by organizations, regions, countries, etc. In the case of Bhopal gas disaster, the network of Participatory Research helped us in India to get access to information about Union Carbide and MIC globally -- from Chile to USA, Canada, Germany, France, U.K. Scotland, Philippines and Brazil. It strengthened our hands to struggle for the cause of these victims in Bhopal.

Besides, on an ongoing basis, a Network is the most efficient and flexible mode of sharing information, experiences and ideas across like-minded persons, groups and organizations spread geographically and working on diverse issues.

The Network of Participatory Research has proved to be all the more relevant and effective as the principles and ideals of Participatory Research seem to be congruent with the practice of Networking.

We participatory researchers share common visions, dreams and struggles. However, we operate from different geographical locations, entry points, focus etc. Thus, we have essentially a common approach to differentiated geographical, social, economic and political context of our work.

Given this combination of similarity and commonality based on ideals, dreams and struggles, and operating in differentiated reality in terms of geographical and socio-political situation, it is inconceivable that we could create an International Institute of Participatory Researchers. And it would be a disaster if we even did this. Therefore, we have to look for mechanisms which could provide a common base and source of strength for all Participatory Researchers in the World. And as we struggled in the earlier phases of our work, we realized that perhaps we ought to try and establish a Network.

The Networks of Participatory Research have, therefore, provided these functions of exchange of information, experiences, and ideas; building linkages across like-minded and similar individuals and groups; and, providing a linkage across country and regions for both stimulation and solidarity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A NETWORK

A Network is a mechanism to accomplish certain purposes. Some of those purposes have been discussed above. What are the characteristics of a Network ?

1. A Network is an informal and flexible mechanism based on the initiative and interest of individuals and groups. No centralized planning and implementation is done in a Network; activities and events of a Network depend on the initiatives of different members. An informal and flexible approach, as opposed to formal and centrally planned one, is characteristic of a Network.
2. A Network recognises the value of experiences of its ordinary members and eschews the concept of expertise. No one in the Network is considered as the expert; different members have different experiences, all of which are worth learning from. The diversity and variety of experiences of members is valued and encouraged.
3. Members are encouraged and supported to take control over the activities, directions and resources of a Network. A sense of shared responsibility and ownership over the Network and its management is gradually evolved. This helps in ensuring democratic functioning and continued relevance to and commitment of members.
4. It entails shared responsibility among members for sustaining, strengthening and managing the Network. New vistas are explored, new members are invited, existing members are encouraged -- by all the existing active members of the Network. Of course, all this is done within the context of a shared vision and common purpose.
5. The Network has the capacity to mobilise its membership and their resources for collaboration around common issues at a rapid pace. The flexibility and spontaneity in the Network is so maintained that quick and effective response of members around emerging issues could be activated and crystalized.

6. The Network requires some animators, convenors, or coordinators to act as 'nodes' for energising and sustaining information, ideas and resources among members of the Network. Some key persons or organizations need to assist in this 'Nodal' function of sustaining the movement and flow. The Convenors or Coordinators of the Network can be many, based on location, task, interests, etc. Their role is not supervision or direction; their role is animation, catalyst, promotion.

Similarly, 'Nodes' can generate some tools for ongoing animation -- a newsletter, howsoever simple or limited it may be, tends to help in this animation by sustaining the flow of information and ideas. Keeping in touch always help in a Network; a newsletter then becomes a vehicle for the same.

PITFALLS

Networks have also shown certain pitfalls. From our experience, I would like to highlight two of them here:

i) In some countries, Networks are being created around a particular donor agency -- be it from the North (government or non-government) or from the South itself. This is a false Network, and has the potential of weakening coalitions and linkages around common interests. Networks are focusing on issues, concerns, problems, etc...; not around resources.

In some cases, the flexibility, informality and spontaneity of a Network has been abused as a licence to anarchy and 'do your own thing.' Networks demand greater discipline -- self-discipline among members, and much more than is needed in organizations. Thus members of a Network should become clearer about this responsibility and expectation.

The above characteristics and purposes of a Network can be understood more deeply in the context of the following case study of the Network of Participatory Research.

AN APPRAISAL OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH NETWORK

Participatory Research, its practice, its networks and the programme of the International Council for Adult Education on Participatory Research has completed a decade. It is perhaps now time for an appraisal of this period, its history, origin and an attempt to outline some directions for its future.

Broadly speaking the last decade in the history of Participatory Research can be divided into three phases. In this note those phases of the history as well as some directions for the future are outlined for critical reflections.

PHASE I: INCEPTION (1977-80)

This phase is characterised by the period of three years 1977-80. This is the inception phase. The history of Participatory Research is rooted in the critique of the conventional social science methodology based on the principles of adult education. This critique was intensified through the practice of adult educators in countries of South and culminated in the Dar-es-Salaam Conference on Adult Education held in 1976 in Tanzania. A group of people, similarly concerned and beginning to develop a critique of conventional social science research, sat together for a while to share their ideas. Participatory Research as a phrase was coined perhaps then. It was then decided to convene a meeting of a few interested people from different parts of the world in early 1977 in Canada to concretise some further ideas on Participatory Research. The AURORA meeting in Canada in 1977 marks the beginning of Participatory Research Network. Still groping with the new emerging ideas of alternative research

paradigm, the groups of people assembled there from Asia Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe essentially began to articulate more systematically and coherently their critique of social science research. It was in this meeting that the idea of informally linking up with similar other people in different regions was mooted. This marks the beginning of Networks. Though still in a stage of infancy, the idea essentially entailed identifying linking up and sharing information and experiences of the people who are developing similar critiques of social sciences methodology and beginning to articulate an alternative paradigm. The people who had attended that meeting were identified as initial coordinators of the regional networks. During the next year, in some parts of the world, these coordinators became active in linking up with similar other people in their region and initiating a communication and dialogue among them. In some parts of the world, these coordinators did not pursue it and alternative people were identified to pursue the networking process. The period 1978-79 was essentially used to sharpen, deepen and systematise our collective critique of conventional social sciences research and begin to articulate elements of what was then thought as characteristics of Participatory Research. The definition of Participatory Research even then had the alternative vision of society but it focused on separate elements of investigation, education and organisation. The political economy of research and questioning the basic objectives of research enterprise had only begun to be articulated during that period.

The regional coordinators met in October 1978 in Venezuela and then in the summer of 1979 in Sweden. It is in the second meeting that the idea of an International Forum of Participatory Research was mooted and planned. In April 1980, in Yugoslavia, such a forum got together more than 60 Participatory Researchers from different

parts of the world. They brought with them their experiences, their case studies and spread over a period of a week, this event marked a major step forward in the articulation of meaning of Participatory Research as well as strengthening regional networks. The case studies, the theoretical papers, the debate in Yugoslavia was an important milestone. It began to raise the issues of links between Participatory Research and people's struggles and organisations, the question of whose interest does research serve and the production and tools of production of knowledge and the appropriation of knowledge of the experts by ordinary people. This was also the first event where members of various regional networks came together to meet across regions and establish links and bonds of solidarity. Many of us who attended that forum felt rejuvenated, affirmed and supported.

PHASE II: CONSOLIDATION (1980-85)

After the Yugoslavia forum began the next phase of consolidation in the history of Participatory Research. Regional networks began to develop their own separate identity in all regions; regional workshops, training programmes, meetings, sub-regional events were organised; learning materials, case studies, theoretical papers and debates arising out of these regional experiences were published and disseminated. This was also the period which marked the integration of Participatory Research as one of the programmes of the ICAE. This was in marked contrast to the previous phase where it was just a project of the Council, somewhat removed from the mainline activities of the Council. As a programme of the Council, it began to inform various national and regional members of the Council and in several parts began to influence regional members. In Latin America, for example, it was the network of Participatory Research which gradually transformed itself into the Latin American Association for Adult Education, CEAAL. In Asia, the network began to work closely

with ASPBAE and similar situation exists in Caribbean. The Council published a series of books, collections of case studies, monographs and documents on Participatory Research which was widely distributed, disseminated and shared. A special issue of Convergence brought out the debates from the Yugoslavia forum to further inform practitioners educators.

This was also a period where in several regions, exciting, intensive and potentially very important initiatives in the practice of Participatory Research were undertaken. In Asia, The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) emerged out of the Networking as an organisation committed to the practice of Participatory Research, primarily in India, as well as in the countries of Asia. Similar development took place with the Participatory Research Group in Toronto, which which acquired an independent identity and demonstrated its commitment to the practice of Participatory Research. The period also witnessed variations in the development of regional networks. While the Asian and Latin American networks continued to grow and strengthen themselves, there were difficulties with the African and the European networks. The European network finally started functioning as it got divided into several sub-regions: U.K., Northern Europe and Southern Europe. And since then, other sub-regional networks have functioned well, except Northern European Network. The African network, ever since the departure of the first coordinator, has been experiencing continuous difficulties and has, in fact, resulted in a decay of the network. The momentum that was generated in Africa during the first phase seems to have been lost during the second phase. The North American Network also went through a process of differentiation and expansion in both Canada and United States towards the latter part of this phase. The Caribbean network came into existence during this phase, went into a period of disorganisation during the

letter part of this phase, and has come up again.

The period also marked two important events in the history of the networks. The first one is the Paris Conference in 1982 of the International Council for Adult Education; there a special interest group on Participatory Research attracted more than 80 participants from about 50 countries. A second, more recent, World Assembly in Buenos Aires in 1985 saw Participatory Research as one of the fullfledged working groups and attracting more than 60 participants. As a programme, as well as activity of the International Council for Adult Education and its regional and national members, Participatory Research began to be recognised as legitimate and important, and the networks of the Participatory Research began to acquire some degree of credibility in different parts of the world.

The period also witnessed the rise of a variety of somewhat alternative meanings of Participatory Research. The programme of UNRISD on popular participation began to talk about Participatory Research. The ILO programme, began to talk about participatory action research and these alternative formulations began to, on the one hand, advance the concept and practice of Participatory Research, and on the other hand, fragment the emerging field. However, the growing interest in the practice of Participatory Research in different parts of the world and increased documentation of those practices led to a situation that by the end of this phase Participatory Research was at least a heard concept, if not fully understood one, in debates on adult education, development alternatives and peoples' empowerment. The period reached a stage of a clearer articulation of the meaning of Participatory Research. Participatory Research is no more presented as a critique of traditional social science research, it has a philosophy and a worldview of its own. It is beginning to articulate questions of political economy of research: who's interest does research serve? and it is transcending the petty

debate on the issues of techniques and methods. The practice of Participatory Research has demonstrated that the tools and techniques are not central issues. The issue is control over the process of production of knowledge, its storage and its use.

PHASE III: DIFFUSION (1985 ONWARDS)

The third phase in the history of Participatory Research has just begun, about a year or so ago. This is the phase of diffusion. This is the phase where links between Participatory Research networks and peoples' movements have been more clearly articulated and established. This is the phase where Participatory Research no more stands on its own, in opposition to conventional social science research. This is the phase where Participatory Research sees itself as an ally of the struggles of local people, of the tribals, of the landless, the urban poor, the workers, It is seen as a contribution to the strengthening of the movements: peace movement, workers' movement, womens' movement, movement around indigenous technology and local and local control. Participatory Research has begun to be recognised as an alternative methodology of empowering the people, of generating knowledge from the point of view of the experience of people, contributing to the ideas of an alternative people controlled local development. As a result, the networks of Participatory Research are beginning to include people active in different movements and different problem areas. The debates are no more on the methodology and epistemology of Participatory Research; they are focused on the use of Participatory Research on problems of deforestation, land, occupational health and safety, womens' empowerment, etc.

Therefore, in a way the original identity of networks of Participatory Research is beginning to get defused. This has perhaps happened most dramatically in Latin America, and it is beginning to happen in Asia as well. Issue-based coming together of Participatory Researchers is

principles, the philosophy and the worldview of Participatory Research has begun to find expression in a variety of related fields, like training, evaluation, documentation etc. Alternative methodologies of training, called Participatory Training methodology, and evaluation called Participatory Evaluation methodology, have begun to surface from practice, deriving their strength and meaning from the principles of Participatory Research.

This suggests that perhaps the future directions of the networks of Participatory Research as well as the programme of the Council on Participatory Research may be very different from what has been the history over the last decade. It appears that what is important is to find ways to articulate and disseminate the inherent philosophy and the world view, the principles of Participatory Research on a wider scale and to seek their integration in a variety of issues of development, peoples' organisations and struggles in different contexts. The future holds promise only if Participatory Research begins to link itself up with peoples' concerns and issues and not limit itself to a debate on methodology and epistemology.

However, this phase also perhaps needs a greater emphasis and influencing the academia as well as challenging the academia. The first phase in the history of Participatory Research was marked by a critique of the academia, of conventional social science research. In the second phase, we all got very busy in doing Participatory Research in discovering its meaning through practice, in articulation. We almost lost contact with the academia, with the centres where the new people are being indoctrinated and trained. It appears that we need to go back to those centres now with much greater strength, much clearer vision, much more coherent and systematic arguments, definitions and examples and we need to begin the process of influencing the young, those who are today trained in these centres of learning, research, training in different parts of the world.