

Participatory Research

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During the last decade, **major** debate has taken place on the inadequacies of models and strategies of development initiated during the 50s and 60s. Bulk of the criticism has centred around the **alien** and western nature of these development models and strategies and **top-down** approach centred on technology and economism. It has been argued that people's participation in their own development is the only alternative towards solving major problems confronting the world in general and the **developing** countries in particular. As a result, now efforts have been launched in different settings to mobilise and organize local groups to take charge of their own development through the process of collective action in their common interest. Moreover, new awareness of such ongoing efforts has also developed among those concerned with the problems of development.

The role of knowledge

However, the debate on development has not sufficiently focused on the impact of knowledge in facilitating or inhibiting development processes. Since World War II the basis of much developmental strategies, be they industrial, agricultural or social, have depended on a base of knowledge that has been created through research in natural, physical, biological and social sciences. Over these years, knowledge has come to be a major source of power and it has been predominantly used to perpetuate the interests of those who are in positions of power.

Thus there has been an alliance, sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit, between the haves and the scientific community in general. The bulk of the members of the scientific community also come from the same socio-economic strata as the haves and therefore contribute to the furthering of the status quo in most societies.

In the last thirty years or so, knowledge has become one of the most important commodities and its production and utilisation has been very closely controlled by elite strata of professional researchers. Under the cover of objectivity and neutrality, professional researchers and their associations have perpetuated the myth that production and utilisation of knowledge is a highly specialised activity requiring years of training and apprenticeship.

Monopolistic research

As a result, research has come to be regarded as a monopoly of a few who are supposed to possess the expertise in generating knowledge. Consequently, complex research methodologies, and many of them based on modern computer technology, have been mastered and propagated. The theoretical framework, the research questions, the research methods and modes of analysis in this research process are all controlled unilaterally by this small elite group which is regarded as the sole arbiter of the truth.

The time has now come to seriously question and challenge this type of research. The myth of objectivity and neutrality of the researcher and the research process has already been exposed. The irrelevance of sophisticated research methods in depicting the real social situation has also been demonstrated. Serious ethical issues have been raised in treating human beings as mere objects, subject to manipulation by the researchers. This has been particularly true in

biomedical and social science research. The movements towards appropriate technology for industrial, social and human development is one of the responses in the challenge to monopolistic research.

Participatory research

In recent years, participatory research has emerged as an alternative to this monopolistic research. It emphasises the central role of knowledge in bringing out socio-economic change. It recognises the interdependence between the research process and developmental efforts. It underscores the need for ordinary people to be in a controlling position vis-a-vis generation and utilisation of knowledge. It also recognises popular ways of generating knowledge and works towards demystifying the entire scientific and research processes.

Participatory research has come to be recognised as a methodology for simultaneously carrying out the tasks of knowing, educating and acting. It demonstrates the capabilities of ordinary people in generating their own knowledge, educating themselves and taking actions on that basis. In essence, it attempts to popularise research and demystify the researcher.

As different individuals and groups are working towards participatory models of development in diverse settings, it is important to link up participatory research with those efforts. It will be quite a contradiction to utilise monopolistic research methodology in understanding and describing self-reliant, participatory development. The methodology for promoting such understanding and reflection needs to be built on values and principles which are congruent with participatory developmental efforts. And participatory research is one such alternative.