

23. Some thoughts on development, people's participation, and research

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This paper introduces the session on RRA at the RAP conference. It reflects the dedication inherent in much of the development of RRA to genuine community participation and to giving people greater control not only in the planning of development projects for which they are the clients but also in genuine participation in their implementation. - Eds.

IN AN ARTICLE by Michael Edwards [1] entitled "The irrelevance of development studies," there is a quotation from Canaan Banana, the former President of Zimbabwe, who said:

"Whereas an armchair intellectual of rural development, lost in the labyrinth of misty theories and postulations, can afford to oversimplify matters and get away with it, a practitioner of rural development, that man or woman in the constant glare of various vicious shades of rural poverty and suffering, cannot."

Edwards employs Banana's statement to reinforce his point that a proper understanding of development problems requires a measure of involvement in the process of development itself. In essence, development cannot be "studied" at all; we can participate in the processes that underlie development and observe, record and analyze what we see, but we can never be relevant to problems in the abstract.

However, I would tend to agree with Edward's observation that this is precisely the position of much development research today. The reality of development studies often bears little or no relation to the reality it seeks to address. How to ensure that development research, specifically in the health and nutrition sectors, better responds to the realities poor people are facing is, I believe, the main concern of those of us who are pursuing the development and refinement of participatory methodologies.

There is still little linkage between understanding and action, and research is often divorced from the latter. If our aims are to improve and sustain the livelihoods of the poor, we should be increasingly concerned with the development and promotion of "action-research."

Non-governmental organizations provide a useful illustration of the need to bring action and research together because, in general, they have neither effectively recorded nor explored the lessons of their experiences. On the other hand, the values, attitudes and elitism of conventional researchers have prevented them from working as equals with practitioners and the community. Those who define the problem and study it are usually far removed from it, both spatially and intellectually [2]. Responsiveness to people's needs, and awareness of the complexities of gearing research to address them, are rarely among the criteria used to judge merit for academic

advancement. The reductionist nature of scientific training, with its segregation into specialized disciplines, does not seem to adequately meet the demands of development research.

Participatory methodologies, including rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and rapid assessment procedures (RAP), have emerged in response to this - need for more people-oriented approaches to research, focusing on problems identified by the community. RRA in nutrition planning offers an effective means of understanding the broad causes of community nutrition problems and can strengthen standard methods of nutritional status assessment [3].

In health and nutrition, as in other fields of development, the perceptions and opinions of "target populations" must be taken into account. There is a divergence of views, however, regarding ways in which such perceptions should be translated into decisions and change. Chambers and Mascarenhas stress that, for plans and policies to succeed in practical terms, those most affected by them should be actively engaged as participants in decision-making as well as in the implementation of the change process [4,5]. These workers have also demonstrated the remarkable capabilities of poor, illiterate people to conduct research. Others have preferred to retain the functions of conducting research, utilizing results and making decisions at levels outside the community [6,7].

Participation as a concept in development theory and practice has now gained wide acceptance. Nevertheless, an understanding of the mechanisms by which it is put into operation in the field and in institutions, and the stresses as well as the advantages that accrue from participatory practices, is still evolving. This is particularly true in the realm of scientific enquiry. increasingly, researchers are attempting to establish dynamic linkages between their own perceptions and those of people who lack training and experience in research but upon whom innovation, change and development ultimately depend. This means that participatory research may not exclusively involve the poor themselves. Susan George has well argued the case for ascertaining the effects of power structures on food security and hunger [8]. In this context, the most useful research would seek to change attitudes among elite groups in a direction that will enable poor people to think and act more independently.

Several authors have emphasized the need to direct efforts in participatory research not only at and with the poor, but also at and with policymakers. Within the range of research tools and approaches now available, the appropriateness of each for meeting specific ends needs to be determined. Overall, rapid appraisal techniques may serve to bridge the gaps between resource-holders and beneficiaries on the one hand, and academic purity and practical action, on the other [9]. This highlights the complexities inherent in planning, organizing and conducting rapid appraisal exercises with their multidisciplinary, behavioural elements and action-oriented objectives. Clearly, the management of RRA is as crucial to its success as is the quality of the research undertaken. Participation is not normally spontaneous; it has to be organized and sustained. This implies that researchers who pursue RRA and other participatory approaches to community development require skills in communication and management not regarded as essential for performing conventional research. Such considerations have implications for the design of training programmes.

The experiences of authors in this session are a consequence of this search to render science more germane to the needs and views of people. They also reflect a growing awareness of the value of participatory research within the scientific communities of developing countries and a strengthening of their capabilities for pursuing people-oriented approaches to national development.

References

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