Participatory Research: A New Paradigm of Development or Subjection?

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Abstract: Participatory Research (PR) is defined as a collaborative process of research, education and action concerned with social transformation. Various strands of participatory and action research approaches have been practised since the mid-1940s. PR involves researchers and participants working together to examine a problematic situation or action to change it for the better. Participatory research is rapidly becoming a leading paradigm within the social and environmental sciences that believe it enables local people to directly voice their concerns without mediation by an outside expert. However, critics argue that participatory researchers often re-authorise themselves as new experts of participation, rather than truly handing over authority, thus, PR formulates a new kind of subjection. Against this backdrop, our article examines the opportunities and limitations of Participatory Action Research (PAR). We argue that PAR encounters conventional research approaches where the outside researcher sets the agenda, decides on the questions to be asked and implements the interview or questionnaire survey for later analysis. By emphasizing shared learning, shared knowledge, and flexible collaborative analysis, participatory methods and techniques deployed a process of transformative reflexivity in which both researchers and participants reflect on their (mis)understandings and negotiate the meanings of the information generated together. This article, in spite of some pitfalls, labels this new trend as a radical paradigm shift towards a new developmental knowledge.

Keywords: Participatory research, tyranny, paradigm, local people, power. .

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a rapid increase of participatory research. This branch of research is a new methodology in social science in which the researcher offers one or more members of the group/community studied to play more active roles than merely those of the passive interviewee (Whyte, 1989). The new approach uses "to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act" (Chamber 1994c: 1437)[1]. For Leeuwis (2000: 932) these methods are community based 'problem solving and/or project identification' tools. The current wave of participatory research (PR) is used as a way of classifying research that has moved beyond researching 'on' to researching 'with' participants. In general, participatory research approaches are used in developing countries for community/development which includes local people at all stages, from priority setting to solution implementation. Selener defined Participatory

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[1] Chambers also argues that the idealized aim of participatory research is "to enable people to present, share, analyse and augment their knowledge as the start of a process. The ultimate output is enhanced knowledge and competence, and ability to make demands, and to sustain action" (Chambers, 1994b: 1266).

Action Research (PAR) as "a process through which members of an oppressed group or community identify a problem, collect and analyze information, and act upon the problem in order to find solutions and promote social and political transformation" (Selener, 1997: 17). Some authors (e.g. Cleaver 2000: 36) claim that participatory research approach (PRA) constitutes a 'new paradigm' of development, while others argue that "a need of rethinking participatory approaches, maybe even it's abandonment" is necessary (Cooke and Kothari, 2002: 1). Robert Chambers, a leading promoter of participatory development, ones wrote that these methods produce quick, cheap and reliable results. He also argued that PRA has true intention to involve the poor in the process of development analysis. However, now the same scholar claims that "PRA faces dangers and is vulnerable" (Chambers, 1994c: 1441). Some authors have called these methods as 'new Tyranny' (see Cleaver, 2001; Mosse, 2001).Following this debate, this article intends to explore: Do participatory research practices represent a radical paradigm shift towards a new developmental knowledge, or a new tyranny of international development?This article aims to provide an answer to this question.

Methodology and Structure

The study is interpretive and qualitative in nature. Secondary sources, e.g. published articles and books on the participatory research were reviewed as secondary data. We also used observation to explain the terms and problems. This article holds a debate on PR and aims to assess their validity by analysing the opportunities and pitfalls of participatory research. We have used interpretive research method since this research paradigm argues that social reality is not singular, rather shaped by human experiences and social contexts (ontology), and is therefore best studied within its socio-historic context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of its various participants (epistemology). In structure, the article has six parts. Part I presents the research question following the puzzle and debate on participatory research. While Part II describes the methodology of the study, Part III presents the main features and growth of participatory development practice.The importance of participatory approaches is discussed in Part IV, in which we show how PR contributes to grass roots people's empowerment – a shift of top-down approach. With some specific examples, Part V discusses the limitations of participatory research in which we focus the critics that claim that PR reestablishes the subjectivity of the poor and dominance of development partners. We draw the conclusion in Part VI in which we will provide some policy options.

Participatory Research: Meanings, Origin and Growth

The term, 'Participatory research', was first introduced in Tanzania as a practice (Hall 1984: 290). However, many NGOs and researchers identified their own work with the concept or were stimulated by the method to instigate development research. It aims 'to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice and unsatisfying forms of existence'(Reason and Bradbury, 2006: 1).The current wave of

participatory research has begun as a reaction to the highly centralized development strategies of the 1970s and 1980s. More precociously, the failure of so-called Green Revolution and Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) shaped the perception that 'top-down' development approach is not fruitful for the development of poor as it detached improvised people from their needs. Development agencies and NGOs are convinced by this premise.In this context, distinct participatory approaches such as Rural Rapid Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Farmer Participatory Research (FPR), Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) etc. were emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. By and large, all of these varieties are marked by rural needs, decentralization and different problem-oriented (Chambers,1994b; Williams, 2004).They also follow similar conceptual framework, e.g. providing a community based situational analysis, contextual solution of local problem (Leeuwis, 2000; Chamber, 1994c). Moreover, all of these methods emphasize the existence of different stakeholders in a problem situation (Leeuwis, 2000: 933).According to Mansuri and Rao (2012), this shift was marked by the following belief:

> "giving the poor a greater say in decisions that affected their lives, by involving them in at least some aspects of project design and implementation, would result in a closer connection between development aid and its intended beneficiaries" (Mansuri and Rao, 2012: 2).

Therefore, the emergence of PAR came mostly from the 'research field' rather than conventional knowledge. Since participatory development offers new spaces for poor and further political action, these projects have been called as 'The Voices of the Poor'.[2] These research approaches,active in over 100 countries in the developing world-representing the views of the poor (Williams, 2004: 557).It is claimed that PAR can bring new ways of thinking about what life is like for various groups of people throughout the world. Because, Mcintyre (2008: 1) notes, it is a shared initiative to examine a research problem, a collective action that empowered the people involved, and a two-way communication between researchers and participants in the research design, execution and diffusion of the research process.As participants engage in PAR, they simultaneously address integral aspects of the research process. For example, the question of who benefits from a PAR project; what constitutes data; how will decision making be implemented; and how, and to whom, will the information generated within the PAR project be disseminated? By imposing these questions and also activating dialogues between and among participating actors, PAR becomes a living dialectical process,changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act (McTaggart, 1997).

PR can be split into two: induce and organic. While induced participation is derived by large-scale bureaucratically managed processes, organic types of participation are organized by civic groups. The PRA requires a very different approach to development, e.g. close attention to contextual variation and to uncertain trajectories of change. For Peter Park, participatory research is a "means of putting research capabilities in the hands of

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[2] World Bank labeled this title. For detail, see, Williams (2004: 557)

deprived and disenfranchised people so that they can transform their lives for themselves" (Park,1993:1).

Action research has a long history, rooted in the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, when he designed social experiments in natural settings. It was boosted by the other research movements, including the liberation thought (Freire, 1970), feminism (Stanley and Wise, 1983), and critical thinking (Kemmis, 2001) movements. However, Kidwai and Iyengar (2017) as noted by in their review of the history of action research, although many of these original forms of action research emphasized participation, the power to direct and shape the research often remained in the hands of the researchers. Recent developments in action research place greater emphasis on full integration of action and reflection and on increased collaboration between those involved in the research project (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: 9). In the Third World, PAR has enabled researchers to develop a systematic inquiring approach to their own practices that embraces different issues, e.g., education research to women empowerment, peace building in post-conflict society to problems to rural farming, cooperative learning to Agricultural development.[3]

Participatory Research and Local Turn of Developmental Knowledge

The participatory approaches provide a range of opportunities for research and development since these methods advocate for people's empowerment.In participatory research both the participants and researchers feel some issues to be changed. They then take initiatives accordingly, which create a new cycle of research activity and knowledge. By this new cycle, both researchers and participants improve their understanding since it's a two way learning process(Kindon et al., 2007: 2). To enable these cycles, they develop a context-specific methods, which may follow focus group discussion (FGD), structured interviews, informal dialogue and observation and even visual methods like video communication e.g. Skype interview, Facebook discussion.This methodological openness reflects PAR's commitment to genuinely democratic and non-coercive research with and for, rather than on,participants (Wadsworth, 1998). Because of its methodological openness and power of inclusion, the early 1970s saw the proliferation of Participatory and Participatory Action Research approaches particularly in Africa, India and Latin America.

Chambers (1994b) listed the principles of PRA, these are: direct learning from local people and sharing, offsetting biases, optimizing tradeoffs, promoting diversity, practicing critical self-awareness and responsibility. All of these principles are directly related to people's empowerment. Though PR is not value-neutral, it is ideologically committed to the un-privileged sections. It claims social change and action, while conventional research approaches have avoided these aspects.

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[3] For a review on the evolution of PAR, see Kidwai and Iyengar (2017).

Since PRA stimulates people's sense of ownership and belongingness in a development project, the approach can increase political capabilities of local communities (Williams, 2004). PRA approach successfully explores many community issues and strengths. For example, it has addressed social and economic injustice in Africa and Asia. Over the last 20 years, it empowered people to take ownership in the course of transforming in their living society (Mosse, 2001).

In the 1970s, Paulo Freire (1972) offered a community-based method (CBM) to enhance local participation in making knowledge and to ensure social restoration. He challenged the existing paradigms of knowledge which is marked by colonial legacies, modernistic development and the Western domination. He shows poor and marginalized people/groups developed an alternative knowledge through their everyday lives and resistance. Following Paulo Freire, Kindon and his colleagues argue that systematically excluded or oppressed are more likely to hold different explanations about the history, structure, consequences and the uneven social arrangements (Kindon etal., 2007: 9).

PAR, therefore, embodies a counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production. This approach may be a helpful tool for addressing and identifying community issues. Chambers (1994c: 1443) argues that PRA has potential to complement and substitute quantitative surveys and add much richness to the data. Instead of interviewing/ questionnaires, participatory methods are used in identifying target groups. For example, in Bangladesh, BRAC followed participatory recording as an alternative way to identify target groups for a non-formal education program.Similarly,Action Aid in Pakistan has been made a well-being ranking of 38,000 people by using this method (Chambers, 1994c: 1443). Besides, PR has the potential to create systematic knowledge with the involvement of the people who suffer from the issue being examined. Participatory methods can be used as alternatives to questionnaires in monitoring and assessment. For example, in Gujarat, villagers/farmers maintain their own-maps for monitoring soil conditions and water conservation (Shah, 1993).

A participatory approach more easily allows the investigation of sensitive issues. For example, drawing on case studies from a flower farm of Zimbabwe, Kesby and Gwanzura-Ottemoller (2007: 71-73) revealed a number of sensitive issues – sexual harassment, abortion and sexual favors – that would have been unlikely to surface using more structured methods, which do not allow for the voice of the marginalized to be heard. Their findings show that abortions are common because pregnant women in farm or factory or in a temporary positions are typically not given another contract when their current one ends. The female workers lamented, 'Many female workers have had abortions, even at eight months to avoid the risk of being sacked' (Ibid, 74). In Kenya, a group of researchers indicates that PRA has been successful in capturing workplace-related concerns and argue that the use of a participatory approach is particularly useful in identifying the conditions of vulnerable workers and in providing a vehicle for worker empowerment (see Opondo et al., 2007). For them, the interaction and group dynamics of participants not only facilitate group cohesion, but also offer a safe space for them to freely express their concerns.

The PRA process can provide research participants with a sense of control over their lives that lead them into an empowerment process to promote social change (Mandakini, 2005). In principle, this approach emphasizes on the active participation of the unprivileged people in generating their own knowledge. This effort constitutes an influential impulse for people.These approaches can be used for enhancing community's capacity that helps upgrading of life standards (Balcazar and Suarez-Balcazar, 2009). According to Chambers, these methods are used "to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act" (Chambers, 1994c: 1437). Moreover, PRA is useful to organize community efforts to identify needs and solve problems in underserved populations.

Participatory research is a 'collective enterprise' in nature; methodologically it entails groups of people. It focuses on collective analysis of a given circumstances. In contrast, conventional research approach is inherently an individual effort(Mandakini, 2005: 99). It can make a bridge between policy makers and poor. It is said that rural development would gain momentum if bureaucrats and policy makers were able to spend time in rural areas. According to Chambers (1994c: 1447), PR approaches have provided ways in which bureaucrats, donor and academics can work with local people. By this process, both sides might be benefited. Additionally, PR may create distinct organizations for the have-nots. In general, deprived and marginalized people of Afro-Asia are disorganized and isolated from each-other. The process of PR can act as a network among the have-nots since the process brings them in a group-work. In course of time, these networks may turn into the organizations of the marginalized people (Mandakini, 2005: 99-101).

To sum up, PR offers the following three main forms:
- It creates a local knowledge network as indigenous people share knowledge within the society.
- Local people also share their knowledge with researchers. To enable this process, researchers restrain themselves from sharingtheir own ideas, at least at first.
- Researchers share new ideas(what they learnt)with outside society.

The PR approach has challenged the traditional hierarchical relationships between the researchers and 'researched'. However, while PR seeks socially and environmentally just processes and outcomes, theymayestablish a form of power and can reproduce the inequalities(Kindon et al., 2007). It is true, of course, that the omnipresent idea of PR in international development, can make a new form of tyranny (Kothari, 2001).Currently, several 'schools' exist within the broad range of community research, which embrace particular intellectual traditions and contexts (Fals-Borda 2006a). Hence, these divergences and risk of a backlash within the PR approaches may be a cause of potential conflicts.

Pitfalls of Participatory Research: Rewrite the Subjectivity of the Poor

In spite of the popularity and potential, participatory research faces a series of complex and painful critiques, mainly from development studies, that pose questions on the utility and

legitimacy of participatory action research (i.e. Cooke and Kothari, 2001b).These critiques engage with post-structuralist theories (e.g., Michel Foucault), and point towards the negative effects of PAR as it has been commonly deployed within the international development context (Kesby et al. 2007: 20).Post-colonial critics argue that PAR researchers often re-authorise themselves as new experts of participation, rather than truly handing over authority, thus, PAR formulates a new kind of subjection (See Kothari, 2005; Henkel and Stirrat, 2001). As Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan correctly point out: "the past decade witnessed a growing backlash against the ways in which participation managed to 'tyrannize' development debates without sufficient evidence that participatory approaches were living up to the promise of empowerment and transformative development for marginal peoples (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 3)."

The main pitfall of participatory research has originated from its popularity since the rapid spread of this family of approaches has made a concern of quality assurance. Robert Chambers (1994a) provides a range of areas where participatory research can be applied; from soil conservation projects to assessing food security, every development aspects are embraced by this methodology. Calling this trend as 'instant fashion', Chambers (1994c: 1441) argues that rapidly promoted and adopted research may lead to low quality and miss-findings.For Chambers "rapid often means wrong" (Chambers, 1994c: 1441). In this rushing process, the poorest are neither seen nor listened to, which is against to PR. Therefore, the increasing popularity of participation within development and policy contexts, for example, represents its commodification within schemes and research that remained 'top down' and extractive(Kindon et al, 2007: 3).

A Policy Research Working Paper of World Bank finds that while participatory projects are effective in improving access to basic services, their success in improving household income or in building sustainable participatory institutions at the local level is not well-proved (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). Rachel Pain and Peter Francis (2003) argue that PR produces a certain type of information and this information may be brief and superficial. They also claim that this approach distributes unequal power and representation amongst participants and between participants and researcher.

According to Hall (1984) participatory research is described as having three characteristics: it is at the same time an approach of social investigation, an educational process, and a means of taking action. This ambiguity has created some difficulties in social science where reality has been divided into separate disciplines and fields of work (Hall, 1984: 298). It is said that empowerment is an issue of power relationships, in which formal and informal institutions play an important role. One cannot understand this relationship without the study of institutions/structure; social action cannot be fully explained by the structure or agency theories alone. However, participatory research emphasizes on an individual's action; it disregards the role of structures. Though people'sdemands are shaped by the agency, Anthony Giddes (1979)claims that an individual's autonomy is significantly influenced by structures; structures are maintained and adapted through the individual action/agency. Therefore, participatory research cannot

analyze human action with structure.

In this academia, the researcher might differ from local actors with regards to priorities, interests, goals, and ideologies. Divergence would be a cause of potential conflicts that may mislead the research.To speak of 'involving people in decision-making' does not imply that all people have the opportunity to participate. However, a couple of community leaders or people to a public meeting enjoy this opportunity (Cornwal, 2008: 280). Following the same line, Mansuri and Rao (2012) argue that the less privileged groups usually get limited benefits from participatory action. In Chamber's words: "the poor and disadvantaged may end up worse off" (Chambers, 1994c: 1445). This is because, by and large, resource allocation decisions are taken by the dominant segments, such as men rather than women, the rich rather than the poor, and the already empowered elite rather than the mass.In this context, Chambers (1994c: 1444) raised a valid question, 'who gains'. Frances Cleaver also puts light on this question:"A number of problems arise in analyzing empowerment within projects. It is often unclear exactly who is to be empowered-the individual, the 'community' or categories of people such as 'women', 'the poor' or the socially excluded'(Cleaver, 2001: 37). "

Although participatory approaches in a development process may create an opportunity for 'haves not', it cannot ensure the development/empowerment of the mass. Moreover, the approaches cannot provide appropriate strategy for "uncovering the 'realities' of poor people and ensuring their involvement in decision-making"(Cleaver, 2001: 38). Participatory development may have become an international and powerful discourse, but in reality it re-establishes a narrow set of 'interest groups', be they local southern elites or policy-makers in Washington. In this context, participation has been considered as the 'new tyranny' of development. On the new tyranny paradigm, critics (e.g. Williams, 2004; Kothari, 2001) present four broad categories of arguments: participation actively 'depoliticizes' development; incorporating marginalized individuals in development projects that they are unable to question; producing 'grass-roots' knowledge ignorant of its own partiality; and foreclosing discussion of alternative visions of development. Alongside this portrayal of grassroots agency, participatory development also denies development experts' role in shaping the processes of participation (Williams, 2004: 93). By obscuring the agency and motivations of development workers, important questions about the nature of management and leadership are bypassed, and key aspects of the development process are thus removed from public scrutiny. In Lesotho, Ferguson(1994) shows that participation merely adds to the 'anti-politics machine'. For him,PR is a Foucauldian exercise of power that reestablish the subjectivity of the Third World's poor, disciplining them through a series of participatory procedures, performances and encounters.

It is a well-spread perception that the local community is a homogeneous society/group characterized by solidaristic relation and their interestsare same. Therefore, participatory approaches put emphasis solidarity within groups. Cleaver (2001: 44-45) argues, for this reason, process of conflict, and negotiation, inclusion and exclusion are little investigated by the participatory approaches. However, the above mentioned perceptions hide the

societal reality: violent group-conflict, diversity and unequal distribution of resources and power. Perhaps, the community is not a natural social entity.Ideally participatory research follows 'bottom-up' approach and decentralization, but in practices many of the development projects strictly maintain'top-down' approach in decision making (Chambers, 1994b). Like conventional research, they are also result oriented, pre-defined, externally imposed, donor guided and worked with limited framework (Mosse, 2001; Williams, 2004; Leeuwis, 2000).

To show the limited capacity of current participatory methods, Leeuwis (2000:941-945) has presented six cases on participation and conflict. For example, San Bosco community in Costa Rica consists of two-sub communities, divided by a river and family lines. Due to distinct infrastructure and local conditions, the two sub-communities have different needs and priorities, which are secured by the community leaders. During the group meeting, decisions on activities are taken by hand rising (a mode of the vote). Typically, both community leaders engage in lobbying in order to gain favorable result. It is a zero-sum game. As a consequence, the defeated community leaders tend to feel discriminated against in participatory processes. This competition leads to serious tensions. Thus, participatory approaches are reinforcing conflict through group meetings. Sometimes, these approaches impose superficial conflict resolutions without adequate follow-up arrangements.[4] So, it is clear, participatory approaches instigate conflicts in rural areas; they have little success on conflict resolutions.

By definition, participatory development privileges 'the community' as the site where empowerment is assumed to occur and considers 'communities' as fixed and unproblematic. By homogenizing communities, and uncritically boosting 'the local' as the site for action, participatory development, both draws a veil over repressive structures (of gender, class, caste and ethnicity) operating at the micro-scale, and deflects attention away from wider power relationships that frame the construction of local development problems (Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

Concluding Remarks

The 21st century is facing two key challenges–the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and the institutions – especially those of government – which affect their lives and reduce the gap between poor people and State institutions/international institutions. Participatory research has the power to reduce the gap and can build a new relationship between local government and local people by removing mass alienation and apathy towards governmental institutions.Though many claims about participation in development remain unproven, it has a long and chequered history (Cleaver, 2001: 53; Cornwall, 2008: 281). Ideologically, PAR is used to 'empower' participants so that they can determine their own future (Leeuwis, 2000: 933). In spite of some limitations, there are hundreds of researchers and activists who are working with participatory research and still more who are sympathetic to this bottom-up approach. In

order to success, participatory projects require a strong focus on learning-by-doing; on monitoring and evaluation and a willingness to learn from failure(Mansuri and Rao, 2012).It would not be a valid argument that PAR is the 'only' or 'the best way' to explain social research with action, however, one may find this newly arise set of methodologies a powerful approach to conduct developmental research. Therefore, the approach deserves closer study by more experts, more support by agencies and more esteem for its goals.

Like the other parts of the Global South, PRA is a very important instrument/method to acquire knowledge to deeper understanding of the research problem. It is assumed that by involving the poorest and most powerless in a research, a participatory approach can initiate a process of empowerment among marginalized peoples. It may also use to create awareness of the rights of poor and worker protections. In Bangladesh, a participatory research in Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector, shows that women workers often reject the sexual harassment of their supervisor. However, in focus group discussion (FGD), they may able to share their fears of being dismissed and to draw sympathy from their fellow group participants (Akterujjaman and Ahmad, 2016). PRA has several advantages over other methods, especially when working with workers. These advantages include: creating a safe peer environment and replicating the type of small-group settings that workers are familiar with in the farm; redressing the power imbalance between researcher and interviewee that exists in one-to-one interviews; and providing an encouraging environment. Similarly, one can employ this approach to investigate the conditions of RMG workers, e.g., discrimination in wages, occupational safety, health, harassment and workplace violence, freedom of association etc. Based on the findings, it may generate policy recommendations and action plans to improve the conditions of workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Thus, participatory approaches can help to produce context-friendly policy.

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