An Introduction to the Principles Underlying

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS

with an Illustration of their Practical Application

A Handbook Prepared by SHIRKAT GAH
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Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1

The Principles Underlying the Participatory Method of Research

Traditionally, researchers have adopted a strictly logical approach to their work, concerning themselves more or less exclusively with the 'facts'. Unfortunately, this approach leads to a view of inquiry and research which tends to overemphasise precision and exactitude; something is either correct or it is incorrect - there is no middle way. Such an approach overlooks the complexities of human lives as it is more concerned with the manifestations rather than underlying causes of behaviour, choices or actions, and thus leads to inadequate analysis.

This logic, which underlies the traditional 'scientific' approach to research, is not the only logic available to us, however. There are many ways of viewing the world, and the time has come to learn a new approach to inquiry which discards the old, 'scientific', model, and replaces it with a more flexible, uncertain, person-centred approach. For the researcher, this change involves far more than substituting one set of textbooks for another. It means abandoning textbooks altogether, accepting that there is no single 'correct' answer; and being prepared to subject individual feelings and beliefs to a degree of scrutiny unheard of in the traditional approach. It is a change in consciousness; it involves seeing oneself (and the world) in a new way.

For too long, research practice has consisted of 'expert' outsiders collecting data, analysing the results, then making recommendations based on that analysis, with little, if any, true participation in the entire process by the people who have been the focus of the research. Outsiders have consistently believed that their knowledge was superior, and that the professional researcher had the monopoly of the power of analysis. Predetermined questions were asked; little true listening to the given replies took place. As a consequence of never being regarded as equals,
and always being treated as incapable of organising their own destiny, 'ordinary' people have accepted the role thrust upon them, hiding their true capabilities from the outsider, and even, sadly, from themselves. The illusion has been created that ordinary people are incapable of directing their own lives, an illusion founded on the arrogance and ignorance of experts.

People - all people - are capable of taking charge of their own destiny, and improving the quality of their lives, if they are encouraged to participate fully in the process of discovering how their problems may best be solved, and how the difficult issues which they face may most easily be approached. They key word is 'participation'. The days of the lone expert and the ignorant masses are over; we are all experts now. Equally, we are all ignorant. For valid, relevant research to take place in a human, social context the researcher must be willing to learn from the members of the community to which she or he is relating.

In the research process, the community members themselves must decide what questions need to be asked and how the answers to those questions may best be collected; they must analyses the results; they must then decide what course of action should be pursued. The participatory method of research necessitates that everyone (including the researcher) takes responsibility for her or his own actions. For researchers, this involves, in part, relying on their own judgement, and acknowledging and owning their own mistakes; for community members, this involves, in part, deciding how problems are to be tackled, and being responsible for effecting change. Whatever the area under review - education, agricultural practice, improving the situation of the very poor, health care - if the members of the community have themselves undertaken the research, then they will feel that the information obtained is truly 'theirs', and that they themselves have the ability to bring about change. The participatory approach is about giving power back into the hands of the people. Members of local communities know the problems they face; they perceive the situation in its relevance to them (a perception unavailable to the outside observer); and they are the people best placed to discover the correct way forward. The only reality which counts is their reality. Researchers must demonstrate by their actions a real desire to learn; they must be open and honest when
replying to questions; and above all, they must show respect for the views and opinions of their fellow human beings.

The strength (and it is a strength) of the participatory approach to research lies in the fact that there is no blueprint. Each research project is unique, and will call for a unique response, often based on the method of trial and error. The participatory approach is neither an easy nor a simple one, requiring as it does willingness on the part of researchers to radically modify their view of themselves and their function. They must be prepared to hand over responsibility to others, and let them make their own mistakes. They must be prepared to enter into a true dialogue with those whom they are seeking to help. Above all, they must be prepared to acknowledge that we live in an imperfect, messy world, and that while the participatory approach can reveal the potential available to bring about useful change, it is not a panacea for all ills.
Chapter 2

Guidelines for Conducting the Participatory Research Process

The main priority in conducting participatory research is to ensure that the community which forms the focal point of the research accepts, and feels comfortable with, the methods used. It is the task of the researcher to create a genuine relationship with the members of that community. Effective participatory research results from a building up of trust and mutual respect, and for this to happen, researchers must recognise from the outset that most of their time will be spent working in the community, not sitting at home analysing data. Analysis, when it happens, will be undertaken by the researcher in collaboration with the members of the community where the research is taking place.
Characteristics of the Good Researcher

The good researcher:-

- will be aware of her/his own limitations, fears and competencies;

- will be prepared to accept ideas from anyone and everyone who offers them, and will value all ideas submitted, even when such ideas radically conflict with the researcher's own point of view;

- will believe that committees have the ability to find their own answers to their own problems, and that the researcher's role is to help convince community members that this is so;

- will be able to work in a variety of locations;

- will be able to speak fluently to community members in their first language;

- will be patient and understanding, and will allow people sufficient time to fully experience and appreciate the research process;

- will be honest and truthful at all times.
Characteristics of the Research Methodology

The good researcher:-

- will develop a variety of ways of posing questions, and will be able to encourage people to respond by the use of gentle persuasion and encouragement ('pushing and prodding') when necessary;

- will be able to accurately abstract, summarise and record the key ideas and feelings expressed by community members;

- will endeavor to help people become aware of their blocks and fears, while resisting the temptation of feeling that it is the researcher's job to solve everyone's problems;

- will use as wide a variety of participatory techniques and methods (including brainstorming sessions, use of open questions, mapping and role play) as she/he feels comfortable with, and will be constantly monitoring their application;

- will attempt at all times to expand the range of approaches employed, to adapt those approaches as necessary, to use the approaches creatively, and to always to remember that structured group discussions are a key element in the research process;

- will ensure that, as far as possible, everyone is involved at each stage of the research process;
will keep a clear focus during discussions, so that the ideas which emerge can be effectively organised and utilised, while at the same time allowing participants to stay with their own confusion, and work things through for themselves, without expecting the researcher to provide answers to the problems raised;

will create an environment in which people can share their ideas and feelings in a disciplined and structured way;

will try to focus on her/his own thoughts and feelings, and then allow that personal awareness to influence how much control she/he should exercise;

will constantly be monitoring the extent to which she/he is using the research methods in an honest and truthful way;

will always be aware that the focus is not on her/his perception of the situation, but on the community members' perceptions;

will always be at pains to make clear whether it is the community members' perceptions or those of the researcher which are being recorded;

will learn to ask for help and support from others whenever she/he feels the need to do so.
Chapter 3

Participatory Research - the Process

When embarking upon any participatory research project, the following series of steps should be undertaken:-

1. **Identification of the Research Focus**
   
The problem, concern or topic which is to be the focus of the research project must be clearly identified before any research work is undertaken, and it is important that the identification is made by the community members themselves, with the assistance of visiting field workers. The 'objective' assessment of the outside researcher must not be given undue importance over the 'subjective' (and, in this context, more pertinent) perceptions of the local people.

2. **Community Commitment**
   
   When there is no genuine desire on the part of the community members to resolve a problem which they face, or they do not see the relevance to them of the research process, or if they do not really believe that it is they who are conducting the research, then the process will be, by and large, a waste of time and effort. Community members must feel that they own the work being done, and that as a result of their own efforts, they can improve the quality of their lives.

3. **Information Gathering**
   
   Using whatever methods seem most appropriate (see 'Participatory Research - the Method' below), the field workers and the community members amass as much
information as possible relating to the topic under investigation.

4. **Analysis of the Data Obtained**

It is important that the analysis of the data obtained should be a collective process undertaken by the community as a whole, rather than being the work of the research team only. The information gathered is sifted, analysed, and reflected upon by the community, with as many individuals as possible offering comment. When a consensus has been reached on the best way forward, appropriate action can be undertaken by the community.

5. **Follow-Up Research**

It is important that the effectiveness of any action taken should be monitored, and that progress made be regularly reviewed by the community members, so that the participatory research method of tackling local concerns is seen as a continuing and evolving process, responsive to local needs, rather than as an isolated one-off event.
Participatory Research - A Toolkit

The participatory research method does not limit itself to one particular means of gathering data, but utilizes a variety of approaches, depending on what seems to work best in a specific situation. The following list of definitions describes the items most likely to be found in the 'tool kit' of the researcher using the participatory approach, but the list is by no means exhaustive. It is essential that all field workers be given adequate training in the application of any techniques used.

No matter which particular technique or 'tool' is employed, the emphasis at all times should be on ensuring that community members actively participate in each stage of the investigative process, so that the research really is undertaken by the people of the locality, and produces results of real value for that community.

Self Survey

Selected members of the local community draw up a short questionnaire composed of simple, direct questions relating to the topic under investigation, and then conduct a survey among the other members of the community. The information gathered is later pooled and analysed.

Focused Group Discussions

Selection of the group is to be decided by the research team on the basis of ground reality e.g. random selection of households, caste/biradri groupings, socio-economic lines, gender, age, etc. The objective is to make sure that a cross-section of views will be elicited.

A small group of community members (ideally, between ten and twenty people) discuss the topic under investigation, the field worker facilitating the exchange of ideas, and ensuring that the discussion remains focused on the problem under review. It is important that an atmosphere is created in which all those present feel comfortable about expressing their opinions, stronger individuals are not
allowed to dominate the discussion, and where conflicting points of view are granted a sympathetic hearing. It is likely that the constitution of the groups will reflect the socio-economic make-up of the community. The successful management of a group discussion calls for a high degree of skill on the part of the facilitator, but it is a very useful exercise to undertake, as it allows various aspects of the research process - data collection, analysis and the planning of future action - to occur in the one meeting.

Brainstorming

This is a specific approach to group discussion whereby key words and ideas are offered for examination, and all the members of the group are encouraged to respond spontaneously with their views and opinions. The essence of a brainstorming session is that all ideas are welcome, no matter how frivolous or irrelevant they might appear to be. It is a time for abandoning the considered response, and giving immediate voice to thoughts as and when they occur. Through such an approach, a way can often be found to tackle a seemingly intractable problem.

Mapping

This is a means of imparting and obtaining information in which community members use the ground, floor or paper (supplemented by the use of stones, seeds, etc.) to draw `maps' showing in graphic form data relating to the topic under investigation, e.g. ownership of land, location of wells, or the distribution of wealth within a community. The great advantage of mapping is that it does not penalise the illiterate; visual literacy is independent of alphabetical literacy, and appears to be near universal. Further, the map is not something secret and hidden, but can be seen, contributed to, and commented upon by all the members of the community.
Role Play

This involves encouraging community members to express themselves by assuming particular roles and acting out specific concerns (e.g. a conflict situation between two community members). Where appropriate, the role play can occur in the presence of other community members. The process of role reversal can then take place, where the participants assume each other's roles, and re-play the situation. This approach often allows concerns to surface which would otherwise have remained hidden; the opportunity to be 'someone else' gives participants a greater freedom to express themselves.

Other 'tools' that the researcher should also consider include:—

- bringing in outside specialists where a specific information input is required which cannot be supplied by the community members themselves;

- encouraging community members to visit other communities facing similar problems, with a view to learning from the experience of others;

- using documentary sources (previous reports, government records, technical articles, etc.) which might contain information relevant to the topic under investigation.
Chapter 4

An Illustration of the Methodology in Use

Under the auspices of Shirkat Gah, a workshop was held in Lahore on 22 - 24 February, 1994, to give those attending a basic training in participatory research methodology, with a view to using such an approach when undertaking a particular research project entitled 'Population, Environment and Responsibility'. This project sought to explore the dynamics of the relationship between population and environment, and the role of institutions (both formal and informal) in such a relationship. The project was conceived as a departure from the usual population/demographic study in that its objective was to try and gain an understanding of how people determine their priorities and imperatives, and as such, the study would not concern itself with gathering quantifiable data, but rather, it would focus on obtaining qualitative information. Recognising that conventional research methodologies are rarely an effective means of gaining an understanding of how, and by what means, people arrive at decisions affecting their lives, it was felt that a different methodology (i.e., the participatory approach) was required when undertaking this particular study.

The project grew and developed as the result of a collective, evolutionary process involving a number of different individuals, the end result being that it was decided to carry out the research in a location situated in an ecologically fragile area of Pakistan. One of the criteria used in the selection of the research site was that there should already be in existence in the designated area a local organisation concerning itself with the improvement of the quality of life of the people of the area, and having a good rapport with the members of the local communities. The research project was to be carried out in collaboration with the local organisation, so that the information obtained as a result of the study would be available to the local people, and could be used by them in whatever way they deemed appropriate. By collaborating in this way, it
was hoped that the research skills of the members of the local organisation would be enhanced, and, most importantly, some lasting beneficial relationships between the various partners involved in the project would be established.

In view of the participatory research methodology used to conduct this particular research project, it was felt to be very important that the word `population' be interpreted in the sense of `community'. The purpose of the study was to achieve a greater understanding of a particular community's sense of responsibility towards itself and towards its environment. The term `population' is an abstraction of the community into numbers; the increase and decrease in those numbers; and the determinants which control such increases and decreases. This `abstraction' is not the way in which the members of a community regard themselves; family members, close friends, and acquaintances within the immediate community are seen as individuals, not simply points on a graph. Hence, the term `population' is inappropriate in this context. It might more usefully be employed when the information gathered with the help of the community has been analysed, and is to be presented to a wider audience.

Three key elements were involved in planning the research design of this particular project, namely, the purpose of the research; the principles underlying the research; and the method of conducting the research. The research design adopted (as outlined below) needs to be viewed in the context of these three elements.

The primary purpose of the research was to try and gain an understanding of how people interpret their responsibilities towards themselves and towards their environment, and how the fulfillment of these dual responsibilities affects the environment and the people themselves. The use made of the research findings would be the secondary purpose behind the work undertaken.

The central principle involved in the participatory method of research (as discussed in Chapter 1) is that the people amongst whom the research is being conducted must be approached on the understanding that they are partners in the research project, and not merely the objects
The researcher observes through oral histories, key informants and myths found among the men and women of the village.

of the research. The latter approach treats people as if they were no more than subjects to be studied, as result of which study, it will be possible to extract, interpret and present a little bundle a facts labelled 'The Truth'. Such a simplistic approach is akin to the attitude of those amateur photographers who believe that the camera never lies.

Bearing in mind the three key areas which were under scrutiny - environment, population/community, and responsibility - it was determined that the research project should concern itself with the following questions:-

- how the community fulfilled its responsibilities towards the environment;
- how the community fulfilled its responsibility towards itself;
- what changes had taken place in the community's relationship with the environment, and what changes had taken place in its sense of responsibility towards itself.
The community's use of the environment would obviously be based on the community's perception of its needs as a community, and how it felt those needs could best be met.

The research process, therefore, sought to elicit responses in the following key areas:-

- Who uses the natural resources, and how are they used?
- Who ensures that the natural resources are renewed or replaced, and how is this renewal brought about?
- Among the members of the community, whose needs are best being met, and how are they being met?
- From a generation perspective, what changes have taken place in the perceived needs of the community?

During the research process, information was sought regarding the community's views on the following points:-

- the most effective use of the natural resources;
- the best means of supporting and sustaining the natural environment;
- the role of men, women, children and outside agencies in the daily life of the community;
- the present and future needs of the community.

The information was obtained using a variety of different methods, including brainstorming sessions, focused group discussions, role-play, and an examination of specific case-studies. A different research team might well have used a different approach. The important thing to remember is that any method may be employed, provided that the research team members have the necessary skills (as outlined in Chapter 2), always bear in mind the ethical principles underlying the participatory approach to research, and are able to foster a genuine spirit of mutual co-operation between themselves and the members of the community for whose benefit the research is being conducted.
Chapter 5

Lessons Learned

As a result of testing the participatory approach with reference to 'Population, Environment and Responsibility', the following lessons were learned, which are of relevance whenever a participatory research model is employed.

Preparations to be undertaken before going into the field

- Researchers should gather as much information as possible about the geographical situation and historical background of the area where the research is to be conducted, as well as getting information about the local customs and language of the community involved.

- Key persons and/or organisations having a good rapport with the community should be identified beforehand.

- The reasons for conducting the research should be clearly communicated to such key persons and/or organisations, and any false expectations dispelled regarding the possible material benefits which might come to the community as a result of being visited by the researchers.

Effective collaboration with local organisations

- In order to effectively explain the nature of the methodology being used, and to ensure maximum participation on the part of the collaborating agency, a one-day workshop involving the research team and members of the organisation should be held. The workshop should not only focus on clarifying the methodology and, where appropriate, teaching the skills involved to selected members of the organisation, but should also concentrate on obtaining
relevant information about the community. Such information might include features peculiar to the lifestyle of the community, as well as suggestions regarding the best time to conduct the research.

- In order to keep the research team manageable and effective it is advisable to invite two members from the host organisation to collaborate in carrying out the research.

- Research team members and representatives of the host organisation should discuss on a daily basis their perceptions of how the research is proceeding, and should constantly review the strategy being employed.

- A clear understanding regarding the division of responsibilities between the research team and the host organisation must be arrived at before going into the field.

Coping with difficult situations

- When conflict situations arise (for example, during a group discussion) the research facilitator should act as mediator, and attempt to resolve the conflict.

- To ensure maximum participation by community members, the venue where group discussions are to be held should be selected by the community members themselves.

- In general, no group meeting should last for longer than an hour and a half, since most of the women likely to attend will be engaged in household and/or other work, and will not be able to spare much time for other activities.

Bearing in mind that the researchers had limited experience of using the participatory approach when undertaking research projects, the experiment proved to be a great success, revealing the participatory method to be an interesting and effective means of obtaining data, and one which, hopefully, will be seen in use more and more in the research field.
Appendix A

Field Study Report

In order to test the methodology in connection with the project entitled 'Population, Environment and Responsibility', a team of researchers visited the village of Dhallewali, some 21 km. from Sialkot, during the period 25 - 29 June, 1994, where they met with members of Community Development Concern, the counterpart organisation. The object of the visit was to examine the effectiveness of the participatory research method as a means of gaining information and insights into people's perceptions about population and environment and the possible links between the two and the role of institutions regarding these issues.

Upon their arrival in the village, the President of C.D.C. gave a brief account of the organisation and its objectives to the visiting research team members. The researchers then described the nature and activities of Shirkat Gah, and outlined the reasons for their visit to Dhallewali. On the evening of the first day an orientation session was held, at which participants were briefed about the participatory research method, and the ways in which it differed from a structured survey, in that the participatory approach is an informal means of collecting information utilising a two-way system of communication. It was emphasised that the new approach does not restrict the amount of data collected; rather it helps in gaining the maximum amount of information. Participants were also made aware of the skills which the researcher needed to possess in order to apply the participatory approach in an effective manner.

The research work was conducted over the next three days, with attention being concentrated on two groups of women from two different parts of the village.

The first group consisted of fourteen members, the women ranging in age from 20 to 30 years. All the women shared the same economic
background, and almost all were housewives, with most of the associated males either working in the Middle East, or being employed outside the village. Out of the fourteen participants, only four women were illiterate, while four of them had matriculated. The women were well dressed, and were able to express their opinions in a confident manner.

The second group consisted of twenty-three members drawn from three different generations, and ranging in age from 14 to 75 years. Most of the women (especially the older ones) were involved in agricultural work, either on their own, or on other people's land. The members of this group, by and large, had greater freedom of movement as compared with the members of the first group.

Sessions with both of the groups began in the same way, with each woman introducing herself to the members of the group, and giving a brief account of her history to date. These introductions helped to break the ice, and the women quickly became relaxed and at ease. A brainstorming session was then conducted, with key words being offered to the group in an attempt to define such concepts as 'environment' or 'population'. The group then came up with their own definitions. It was observed that for most of the time, group members defined things in the same way, differences only arising where the details were concerned. At times it was difficult to control the discussion, some issues leading to severe differences of opinion between group members. At such times research facilitators had to move swiftly to defuse the situation. The level of participation in both groups was very high, although it was noted that the older women were less ready to state their opinions than their younger companions. Although the members of the first group were better able to express themselves, possibly because they had received a higher level of education, the members of the second group were able to contribute a more substantial body of information, possibly because of their greater freedom of movement about the village and the surrounding area.
Appendix B

Workshop participants

Tauseef Ahmed
Zeba Ali
Shahnaz Hameed
Jane Hughes
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Khawar Mumtaz
Amtul Naheed
Farrah Naz
Sarwar Rana
Yasmin Shahid
Javaid Sultan
Sohail Warraich
The session with both groups lasted for about an hour and a half, at the end of which time the women became uneasy, expressing the opinion that they had already neglected their household duties for too long. The research team members had no previous experience of applying the participatory approach, and they realised too late that with more careful management of the time available to them, a larger amount of information could have been gathered. Even so, as a result of the group discussions, a clear picture emerged of the problems being faced by the community, the two major ones being inadequate sanitation facilities, and over-salinity of the soil, resulting in poor or nonexistent crops.

Over the next three days, these methods of obtaining information were made use of, and at the end of this period, a meeting was held with representatives of the collaborating agency order to assess the effectiveness of the participatory approach. The general impression given by the C.D.C. members regarding the methodology employed was that it was an interesting and effective way of collecting data, and that a large amount of relevant information could be obtained in a fairly short space of time, whilst allowing for an in-depth exploration of issues and people's perceptions important to the community.

From the researchers' point of view, it was felt that more information about the village, its culture and history, should have been obtained before beginning the research process, and that before going into the field, a lot of preparatory work involving establishing contacts, arranging meetings, and planning the most effective use of the time available should have taken place. Once in the field, researchers should not be completely dependent on the host organisation to arrange meetings with members of the community; rather they should be able to act on their own initiative. In order to obtain detailed information about an area, it was felt that it would be necessary to spend a minimum period of one week in that area. Bearing in mind these observations, the researchers found the participatory approach to be extremely useful, in that it not only allowed them to collect a large amount of diverse information in a short time, but also helped them to understand the feelings of local community members, their hopes, fears and resentments. By adopting the participatory approach, the whole history and culture of the village community was revealed in a quite extraordinary way.
"Wolf! Wolf! Listen to me!... We don't have to be just sheep!"