Community Participation in Research

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Edited by
Sandra Baldwin and Jenny Cervinskas

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Participatory Research: An Alternative Approach

Jenny Cervinskas, Senior Program Officer, Health Sciences Division, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada

Research that Makes a Difference

Efforts to alleviate malnutrition and to improve social and economic well-being abound. Yet, the problems confronting the developing regions of the world seem without end, with misery pervasive and the human potential of millions remaining untapped and often quashed.

Research is just one of the channels into which money, ingenuity, and effort are being directed to solve pressing problems. But the manner in which research is approached can be critical in determining whether the investigations taken really have a relevance to the improvement of lives and can, consequently, lead to the meaningful application of knowledge.

Over the past few decades, a movement that promises to contribute to development has been growing: the participatory research movement. The influence and the potential of this movement is enormous and, as such, it warrants careful, critical examination and experimentation. Participatory research (PR) sets out a challenge for researchers committed to the improvement of the human condition and prompts investigators to question their assumptions and their chosen study methods.

The term PR has entered the mainstream of scientific lexicon; many researchers and development-change agents frequently describe their practice as being one of PR. Indeed, these days, one can quickly become befuddled by the array of terms being tossed about: participatory action research (PAR), participatory evaluation (PE), participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and so forth. The key concept common to all of these approaches is, as the names imply, participation.
In the contemporary practice of PR, the approach may be defined in a variety of ways, depending upon the goals, ideology, methods, and application of research results that underpin a chosen PR approach. In the history of development approaches, participatory research has emerged from a wide range of scientific fields and has been applied in a variety of settings.

**Development Approaches**

The development strategies of the 50s and 60s failed to provide the expected benefits for the poor and otherwise marginalized members of societies. The assumption inherent in these strategies was that economic growth and large-scale, top-down approaches would provide trickle-down benefits to the poor. This assumption was clearly erroneous, for almost everywhere they were attempted, development interventions failed or were not sustained.

What were the reasons for this failure? Clearly, the approach had to be reassessed. The message distilled from the examination of "development efforts" was that projects were simply not well thought out. All too often, they were conceived without an adequate knowledge of the context in which an intervention took place, and they did not respond to people's needs, however defined. A knowledge of the social, cultural, political, and economic structures, as well as the behaviours shaped from this context, was sorely lacking. The challenge then was to find ways to develop interventions that worked, interventions that were acceptable and sustainable, and that would lead the way to improving people's lives.

One area of hope toward which development analysts and experts pointed in the 70s was community participation. The beneficial effects of active and informed participation were increasingly being uncovered, and then endorsed, with widespread acceptance of the need to include poor people themselves in the process of problem identification and project implementation and evaluation. It became clear to many observers that whenever local populations actively participated in projects, much more was achieved for much less (Rahnema 1990, p. 201). The fact that it took so long for "development experts" to realize that one needed to speak with the people, and not only for the people, seems so apparent that it only underlines the real social distance and the uninformed assumptions from which development planners and programmers often operated.

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1In this text, the terms participatory research (PR) and participatory action research (PAR) have been used interchangeably. As the PR movement grew in the 80s, the designation PAR became more prominent, demonstrating the emphasis placed on linking action to research.
Hence, a shift took place in development approaches toward grassroots mobilization and the "bottom-up" approach. The 70s witnessed an emergence of paradigms focusing on poverty alleviation, basic needs community development, and popular participation. Adult education, "animation rurale," conscientizing education, and popular education all influenced the theory and practice of development and social change. The need to redistribute political and economic power was seen as a key to local development; equity was a key word.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were consistently a major force behind this shift toward participatory development models; they were often the channels through which such models were tried out in practice. Indeed, the work of NGOs became highly valued, with their influence penetrating the big donor agencies and national governments.

Today, the initial enthusiasm and high expectations raised by the notion of community participation in development have been somewhat dampened because field experiences reveal just how difficult it is to generate authentic participation in communities. Some real obstacles to participation seem to have been seriously underappreciated: power differentials that inhibit representation of all social groups, social and cultural constraints to women’s participation, the vanguardism of professionals, and political environments that suppress democracy can all operate to stifle the extent of participation in any development effort. This is not to say that participation should be forsaken but, rather, that community participation should not naively be viewed as some sort of a magic tool that one can easily craft and then use to make development happen.

Understanding Rural Conditions

In the 70s, the term rapid rural appraisal (RRA) was coined to capture an approach that was emerging from the field of rural development. In 1974 and 1978, seminal conferences took place at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), Brighton (Sussex), which grappled with the problematic of rural development and the many misdirected projects. The planning and management of rural development projects obviously needed to be improved. The key to development was to find cost-effective ways for outsiders to learn about rural and poor conditions and to identify projects that would be viable and acceptable locally (Chambers 1985).

RRA has been described as "a rapid learning process, during which the researchers progressively learn from rural inhabitants, from each other, and from observation (and from existing data, secondary sources and key informants)". (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1987). Time is an important aspect, and RRA is
expected to "draw inferences, conclusions, hypotheses from new information acquired in a limited time." This concern reflected a growing frustration with the collection of volumes of unnecessary data and the long time often taken (and excessive costs incurred) to conclude investigations or produce results (both in research and in development interventions).

Although there is no one universal set of methods that constitute RRA, there is a vast range of methods and techniques used by RRA practitioners. One characteristic is the broadening of the repertoire of methods used and the valuation and incorporation of many more qualitative methods.

The main platform of RRA is that it endorses the absolute necessity to understand the sociological, biological, and physical components of rural systems to have interventions that have any hope at all of leading to sustainable development. Today, the influence of this emphasis can be seen by the proliferation of work that carries the descriptor "rapid" and in the systematic inclusion of "local people" in a variety of roles, including problem identification, project execution, and evaluation.

Some of the approaches that have been developed, and are still under development (vis-à-vis their methodologies and scope of application), include rapid rural appraisal (RRA), participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and rapid assessment procedures (RAP).

A feature shared by all of these approaches is a broadening of the core of people who are involved. Again, participation has emerged as a cornerstone. The clear message is that the poor cannot be ignored in development efforts and a reiteration that, after all, development initiatives must be people-centred and, ultimately, people-serving. This message has only recently penetrated some of the larger international assistance agencies, and it will be worth watching just how effectively major agencies of development reflect these principles and strategies within the initiatives that they support.

**Alternative research approaches**

The PR movement owes much to the fundamental questions debated in the social sciences, e.g., What is science? What is knowledge? Who creates it? How is knowledge advanced? The classical social science research methodology grew out of a conception of science that said that scientific knowledge can only be obtained from sense data that can be directly experienced and verified between independent observers; that is, a positivist view of science. The role of social researchers was to examine observable phenomena and discover basic scientific
facts or relationships; investigators were not to become directly involved in linking the research to action (Whyte 1991). How the knowledge was to be used by others was not seen as being the scientists' direct responsibility.

The methodology of mainstream social sciences has traditionally emphasized the concepts of neutrality, objectivity, and the value-free nature of research. People were frequently treated as objects of inquiry, and methods of data collection that exercise unilateral control over the process of inquiry were used. Professionally trained personnel are seen as the sole pursuers of the pursuit of knowledge (Mbilinyi et al. 1982; Tandon 1988 p. 7).

The assumptions of this research methodology and its claims to objectivity were challenged by those who saw social science as a reflection of the structure of society and knowledge as a social product. Researchers, and the institutions in which they work, make decisions about the kind of research that they engage in. These decisions are influenced by values and by the researcher's world view—questions grow out of their own concerns and experiences. As a consequence of these challenges, attention has turned to the questions of why research is undertaken, who legitimately should be involved in research, how are data gathered, and how should the results be disseminated.

**Action Research**

Beginning in the 40s, an alternative tradition of research grew in the social sciences: action research. Action research is generally seen to have its origins and conceptual development and practice in countries of the North. A commonly accepted description of the aim of action research is:

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework. (Rapoport 1970, 499 p.)

The proponents of action research challenged classical social science methodology, saying that it was inadequate for developing a science geared to problem-solving. Alternative criteria of science and alternative methods were proposed as being appropriate for action research as researchers questioned the appropriateness of using the criteria of positivist science to judge the scientific status of action research (Susman and Evered 1978, pp. 594–599).

Many of the early examples of action research are found in the field of organizational science and industrial psychology. Researchers and clients in the workforce worked together to generate knowledge for use in solving problems.
faced by members of the organization (Susman and Evered 1978). Much of this research had as its goal the increase of productivity for the ultimate benefit of the organization. Besides being tried in the workplace, action research has also been experimented with in the school system, health care organizations, and the field of race relations. In many of these initiatives, the relationship between the individual and the larger scale social systems was of utmost importance, with the solution of social (as distinct from individual) problems a research goal (Rapoport 1970, pp. 500–501).

The pioneers of action research felt that action was a source of knowledge. They set out to combine the aims of understanding the dynamic nature of change in social systems, with the aim of knowledge generation (Foster 1990). In the approach, the proponents advocated that the researcher would ground their inquiry in concrete experiences, and act on or in the social system in which the problem under study is situated. Susman and Evered (1978) define action research as a process consisting of five phases: problem identification or definition, consideration of action alternatives, action-taking, evaluation of the consequences of actions, and extraction of lessons learned. The process might then become cyclical, with evaluation and reflection leading back to entry into one of the phases of the cycle. Participation of nonacademically trained persons might vary, depending upon the goal and context of the research and the stage of the research process.

A novel feature of action research was that the approach called for more active collaboration between the researcher and members of the client system than had been customary. "The action researcher brings theoretical knowledge as well as breadth of experience to the problem-solving process. The clients bring practical knowledge and experience of the situations in which they are trying to solve problems. Neither client nor researcher has better knowledge; in a sense, they are both experts" (Susman and Evered 1978, p. 597).

**The Growth of a Movement**

Although participatory research has been influenced by these developments in the social sciences, the PR movement is generally seen to have its roots in the countries of the South. It is through the efforts of researchers, adult educators, and development activists in the South who tried to address the problems of poverty, dependence, and exploitation that the concepts, theories, and practice of PR emerged in the late 60s and early 70s. PR also took root in the North, particularly within the feminist, ecology, and workers' movements. By the late 80s,
the term PR had become commonplace within a wide range of settings and used as a tool to obtain a variety of goals, not all of which were compatible with the original philosophy and aims of PR.

The term PR has been in existence for about 20 years, with the first discussion of the concepts and practice appearing in the adult education journal *Convergence* in the mid 70s. By the late 70s, a number of regional PR seminars had been held in the Third World, with numerous papers on PR practice and methods presented at the World Symposium on Action Research and Scientific Analysis held in Cartagena, Colombia, in 1977. The first, broad international meeting on PR was held in Yugoslavia in April 1980, with more than 50 people from 23 countries in attendance and, in 1982, there was the first formal presentation of PAR to academic circles at the 20th World Congress of Sociology in Mexico City. More recently, there was an international conference held in Calgary, Canada, in 1989.

**Knowledge Creation**

Participatory research, as an emerging alternative research methodology in the 70s and 80s, focused on knowledge and power as central issues. A central objective of PR was the enhancement of the ability of the poor to generate and control their own knowledge, and control the means of the production of knowledge (Tandon 1988, p. 11). Ultimately, a more equitable distribution of power and resources and the attainment of basic human needs and social development was seen as the goal of research efforts.

Budd Hall, one of the early leaders in the PR movement, asked questions about knowledge creation and raised challenges about the validity of the knowledge that is produced by the various academic societies and intellectuals who dominate the production of knowledge (Hall 1979). Hall points out that only a few people of relatively advantageous position in society are the ones who traditionally create knowledge about the entire universe of people and problems.

The conclusion has been made that it is necessary to involve people in the investigation of their own reality to achieve a clearer and more valid understanding of natural and social phenomenon. One needs to learn more about the varieties of experience and begin inquiry from the subject's experience. For when knowledge is fragmented, there will only be partial knowledge, and this can only produce incomplete, or perhaps even invalid, scientific knowledge.
Who Benefits

One of the original platforms of PR was that scientific knowledge should be used to transform fundamental social structures and relationships to decrease societal inequities and liberate people from oppression. Accountability in research was seen to be of prime importance; PR advocates clearly called out that research should benefit people and be pertinent to their needs and should lead to action. Fals-Borda, a sociologist and early founder of the PR movement, has said that "research without action is not pertinent to the needs of transformation. Participation without action is not participation." The main axes of PAR are generally regarded as collective inquiry of concrete problems, mutual education, and action for change.

In focusing on problems of social inequity and forming partnerships with the marginalized, the proponents of PR are clear about the political nature of PR and its potential to incite conflict. As the objective reality of poor or otherwise marginalized people is investigated with a view to changing it, it is inevitable that the status quo is threatened, disturbed. This raises questions about the ethics of doing PR. In particular, the feasibility and high risks involved in conducting PR in a context of repression need to be fully appreciated. Because of its potential to restructure relations of power, it may be that the forms and degree of oppression in certain contexts make it untenable to engage local populations in PR.

In PAR, the separation of roles between the academically trained researcher and the "ordinary" person is blurred. In the conceptual development of PAR, it was proposed that the poor and powerless should become equal and active partners in the research process, from setting the agenda of inquiry, collecting and analyzing data, to the articulation of solutions that can be acted upon. Control of the research process by the participants is seen as one important step toward empowerment. Through their active involvement, participants acquire skills and recognize that by learning and acting together they can create the power to make changes in their social conditions. Another outcome is that research is demystified, as participants realize that they can often do the same kind of work as the so-called experts.

Methods and Techniques

In PAR, a wide range of research methods and techniques may be used, many of which are not used with any frequency in other systems of knowledge production. There is an emphasis on qualitative methods of data collection, and much work has been invested in developing methods for "conscientization" that aim to enhance people's capacity to understand and analyze their reality. Some of
the methods most commonly used are group discussions, public meetings, open-ended interviews, community workshops, fact-finding tours, popular theatre, and role playing.

Besides legitimizing the use of a highly expanded range of research methods and techniques, PR has also shown that there can be creative, effective ways to communicate research results, disseminating them through channels and in forms that previously had not gained much attention by academicians (e.g., community meetings, popular theatre, music, etc.). Communication of research findings through published articles was clearly seen to have its limitations.

**Characteristics of PR**

Although the specifics of the practice of PAR are context-bound, there are a number of features that can be generally described.²

- *The approach is problem-centred and action-oriented.* Research is not viewed as mere data gathering or science for the sake of science. Rather, the dual aim of research is to focus attention on problems that arise because of conditions of inequality and to generate new knowledge. This knowledge is then applied to decide on actions to resolve the problems. A planned consequence of inquiry is locally determined and controlled action (Hall 1979; Maguire 1988).

- *The researcher has a subjective commitment to the target community and to the betterment of the human condition.* The approach recognizes that science is not neutral and value-free. In PAR, research is developed "with and in favour of the group that traditionally has been excluded from the production and utilization of knowledge." (PAHO 1988). As such, research can contribute to giving the marginalized a channel to express their own perceptions of their problems and their views regarding relevant solutions.

- *The research process is collaborative.* Unlike traditional academic research, where the researcher is the expert, the PR approach assumes that a mutual learning will occur and that there will be close involvement of the

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²This summary is extracted mainly from writings of the early leaders in PR and is broadly representative of the objectives and methods as described by them. The main sources tapped for the summary were: Maguire (1988), Society for Participatory Research in Asia (1982), volume XXI (2,3) (1988) and volume XIV, No. 3 (1981) of the journal Convergence, and Kassam and Mustafa (1982).
researcher with members of the community where the problem is situated. Not only is more research time spent in and with the community, community members themselves become involved in aspects of the research study that traditionally have been the domain of the academician (e.g., the identification of research questions, selection of methods, data collection, data analysis, etc.). Indeed, there are those who say that if a project is one of PAR, then there must be involvement of people in all phases of the research study, from full participation in problem definition, the collection of data, the selection and testing of solutions, to the assessment of efforts taken.

- **People's knowledge is respected.** With PAR, the notion that knowledge creation should be the monopoly of the professional is challenged. The academically trained researcher is not the sole expert and not the only one who can contribute to knowledge. The existence of various forms of knowledge and of valid, popular knowledge that results from a person's sociocultural heritage and practical experience is accepted.

- **PAR releases human potential.** PAR encourages the development of a capacity to analyze and solve problems, and it may modify social relations. In this respect, PAR can be empowering. PR is based on the conviction that ordinary people can take control of the circumstances within which they live. In the process of doing PAR, people can learn new skills, better understand their society and the forces that shape their circumstances, and take better advantage of services available to them. Also, confidence can be gained in their ability to exercise and to demand their rights (PAHO 1988).

**PR Critique and Objectives**

A number of criticisms have been aired about PR. Although some of these relate to the philosophy and methodology itself and the original objectives of the early leaders of the PR movement, others have arisen as inconsistencies and tensions arising from the actual practice of PR have become evident.

Although early PR practitioners emphasized that the goal of PR was social transformation and the restructuring of society, experience and reflection seem to have tempered this view. Rather than being able to lead directly to radical social change, PR is instead more modestly seen as a methodology that can make a small but important contribution to the social change process (Tandon 1988, p.12).
Further deliberations are needed on participation as a means or an end in research. To define problems that respond to people's development needs, to conduct a local situational analysis, or when skills development is an explicit aim of a project, PR may have much to offer as a method. Yet, the benefits and the real difficulties involved in attempts to build community participation into the research process need to be carefully assessed in the context of each project.

**Participant Manipulation**

Participatory research theorists have been criticized as promoters of vanguardism, prone to repeat the behavioral patterns of the experts (Rahnema 1990, pp. 205–207). This critique derives from the understanding that through participatory ways, PR practitioners try to persuade the "uneducated" to shed their false perception of reality and, instead, to come eventually to share the PR advocates' own ideologies and understanding and analysis of socioeconomic reality. PR theorists counter this criticism by pointing out that people cannot be liberated by a consciousness and knowledge other than their own, and PAR aims at the liberation of people through organized action which emerges from their own deliberations (Rahman 1985). Even though an outside facilitator might indeed lead people through a process of analysis and reflection, it is the people themselves who arrive at the conclusions and who are the determinants of any action that might be taken.

**Role of Researchers and Participants**

The principle of collaboration on an equal basis between professionally trained researchers and community participants is one that in practice has been difficult to achieve. In most of the experiences of PR, it is uncommon to have a research study initiated by the groups for whom research is meant to benefit or to have nonacademics in a position of full control over the overall project design, direction, and use of results. One needs also to ask what purpose is served endorsing broad involvement at all stages of a study. Should participation be valued as an end in itself? In a study, what benefits accrue from participation that cannot be gained without local participation?

Another difficulty has been that professional researchers are often confronted with constraints and limitations due to their accountability to the institution in which they work (IDRC 1988), and these may prove to be incompatible with the local determination of the action research. The PAR process is often unpredictable, as the objectives and the methods derive from the process itself. This feature may create difficulties for institutions that are not prepared (either intellectually or administratively) to deal with such uncertainties.
Is PR Scientific?

Participatory research, as a reaction to contemporary social science, is seen by some as having an anti-intellectual component, with the concept of science not well-articulated and the apparent acceptance by PR advocates of any type of knowledge as scientific knowledge (Latapi 1988, p. 315). Scientific knowledge requires theoretical foundations, methodological rigour, validation, and systematization — elements that may not be an underpin of all PAR efforts. In this regard, PAR is still trying to learn to cope with the self-imposed task of successfully combining contributions to immediate problem-solving and to scientific knowledge (Maclure 1990).

Who Participates?

Participatory research and indeed any endeavour that tries to promote community participation, often makes references to community members or "the people." This lack of specificity regarding the individuals represented and the nature of their participation may mask realities of local power structures and relations (Maclure 1990, pp. 7–9). The complex reality of power relations in a community acts to favour different levels of participatory activity for individuals, dependent on factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family background, and so on, a fact that may be under appreciated.

Implicit in PR is the notion that there is greater benefit when the type and number of people who participate are enlarged. This needs careful assessment for it may be that certain problems would best be addressed by selective participation strategies, or that local forms of decision-making exist that provide for popular representation but do not necessarily reflect the same values and forms for participation that are held by outsiders.

Claims and Co-optation

In describing the evolution of PAR, Fals Borda (1989, p. 4) writes that "as the Participatory Action-Research approaches gained respectability, many officials and researchers began to claim that they were doing Participatory Action-Research, though in fact they were engaged in something else." Fals Borda emphasizes that there are many examples of the co-optation of PAR, as PAR has by now become a popular appellation for the work of many researchers, and participatory approaches in development have become commonplace.
These developments, for Fals-Borda, place "the survival of original Participatory Action-Research ideals at risk." Thus, the very acceptance of the respectability of PAR has led to some confusion, because there are now numerous advocates of, and definitions for, PAR. Many who call themselves PAR practitioners do not share the conviction that PAR should be focused on the problems of the poor and the marginalized, with the aim of research being to reduce societal inequities through planned action.

In this regard it may be important, as Maclure stresses, to make a clear distinction between PAR on the one hand and qualitative and ethnographic research on the other hand. Both the PAR and the ethnographic approaches share a central concern with the search for better understanding of local perceptions and values and try to capture the interpretations that people have of their own problems and aspirations. To do this, both advocate that the professional researcher needs to have close involvement with the people over a lengthy period of time. In the classical ethnographic approach however, the researcher aims to stay detached from the community. Detachment is necessary so as not to disturb the equilibrium of the society and thus jeopardize the attainment of authentic data (Mbilyini et al. 1982). Action on problems found in the community is not an aim of the research. The investigators have complete control over the research process, extracting data from the research subjects and analyzing it without feedback to them. Further, there is no explicit commitment to enhancing the capacity of community members or to changing the local reality in a way that touches on the power relations or societal structures. Thus, the three tenets of PAR are missing; participation, mutual learning, and action.

In the same vein, it is useful to look at research projects that claim to examine and help provide solutions to practical technical or social problems and to ask if these are indeed examples of studies that lead to community benefits. Here, one may be led to examine operations research projects, policy-oriented applied research, social marketing studies, farming systems research, and projects using "rapid assessment procedures."

In many projects that bear these labels, the claim is made that "people have fully participated in the project" or that the project is an example of PR. However, just because people participate in a research process does not guarantee that there will be a benefit to them. The question of "for whose benefit is this project" must remain one of prime importance.

Community members might indeed be fully involved in a project, but only after the major decisions have been made, for example, regarding the topic, project objectives, and methods. Such is the case with many of the projects that aim to enhance the appropriateness and the acceptability of technologies or
interventions. Have people been consulted about their needs and priorities? For whom is a project relevant? A project might be described as being relevant because it conforms to a stated government policy or program, but the research may indeed be relevant only to the goals and strategies of policy-makers and program planners. Do the people for whom an intervention is meant to benefit actually perceive a benefit or not? Who has selected the technology or made decisions about the service under study?

Nonresearchers might become intensively involved in the development and testing of an intervention, and take full part in discussions about results. Yet, the study itself might remain distant from realizing the goal of lessening oppression and enhancing people's control over their lives, or of directing attention to that link in the causal chain that might have the greatest potential for development. For example, a group of women might be fully involved in a study to determine which high-yielding variety of coffee bean might grow in their farmlands. But yet, they have been totally excluded from discussions about whether or not coffee can help in their own economic and social development.

Conclusions

Participatory action research is a methodology that has emerged from the search to develop a problem-solving science at the service of human development. PAR has advocated that the monopoly of the professional researcher be broken and that the ability of people to contribute to knowledge creation be recognized and harnessed in research efforts. In recognizing popular knowledge and preaching the democratization of science, it was inevitable that there would be a reexamination of the role of the researcher and a call for a restructuring of the relationship between the "scientist" and the "lay person."

In trying to pursue the sometimes contradictory goals of knowledge creation and action for changing living conditions, it is not surprising that the literature and experiences to date with PAR reveal that the approach presents numerous dilemmas and difficulties.

Whatever the future of further conceptual, theoretical, and practical developments of PAR may be, it is clear from more than 20 years of experience with the methodology that PAR has made some significant contributions to the ways in which science is conceived and research conducted, opening a debate on what kind of knowledge best serves development. PAR has challenged the academic community to ask questions about the research that is supported and the assumptions that underlie the chosen goals and methods. In PAR, traditional approaches to scientific inquiry have been seriously called into question and the
tables cannot be turned. Researchers and the research they undertake must be accountable to society if their outputs are ever to contribute to sustainable development.

References


