

Marja Liisa Swantz
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Why PAR?

Why I am sold to PAR? Simply because it is the most logical way of doing research on societal and community issues. To me it does not make sense to come to a group, community or society as an assumed outsider with often shaky or no knowledge of the given situation pretending that with a few questions I can get enlightening answers, which I then go and work into a study. How can I claim to grasp the issues of a group or community whose ownership of knowledge in relation to its own life world I do not give credit?

I have in mind a fresh incidence from the municipality in which I am at present an elected councillor. There is a tendency intentionally to run down life in the rural areas. To resist this trend small entrepreneurs and farmers want to organise the marketing of the food items and handicrafts which their own and neighbouring counties produce. Recently a group of them involved a polytechnic institute with a similar interest in getting the information they would need for the purpose as an exercise for its students. After discussing the task with the few bureaucrats involved the institute produced a questionnaire, which it sent to a given list of addresses for answers. In the meeting called together to discuss the results the participants expressed general dissatisfaction about the questions asked and consequently information acquired. Their co-operation had not been asked to produce the questionnaires. There is a very general dissatisfaction about the prevailing paradigm of training students to work on current societal problems relating to rural survival assuming that the expert scientific knowledge suffices for the working out of the study frame and carrying it out. There is an acute demand for a change of the paradigm to Participatory Action Research, in this case for the survival of the rural economies.

My own entry into PAR 35 years ago happened in similar circumstances in Tanzania where I was engaged in research to begin with as a research associate in the University of Dar Es Salaam. I had no knowledge or training in action research and the participatory method I knew about was the anthropological participant observation. It emphasised the role of the scholar as an observer who was assumed not to influence the studied community. I found it untenable. I mingled in the affairs of the community in many and varied ways and became a villager as an adopted daughter of a local medicine man having my own house in the village for five years.

Two years later I was engaged in research in the same university as a senior research fellow and had to plan my own research projects. I had a chance to work with students who were employed during their long holidays as research assistants to the research fellows. I worked altogether with fifty students in three

years during which I was employed. It was self evident to me that we had to involve ourselves in the development process, which the villages were going through. We worked first with the youth about to leave primary school in practical projects, then with women cleaning offices and working in factories and with families having malnourished children. In each case the researchers became involved in the problems of the people concerned over a period of time. The research changed the attitudes of the students radically and made the research mode a thorough educational process for the villagers, students and myself as a scholar. I became totally convinced that development demanded participatory approach engaged in practice. It took twenty more years before participation was promoted in development co-operation circles and even then, in general not as a research approach but rather as a planning instrument.

As researchers we also planned with several departments of government a PAR pilot project in place of a customary survey for self-assessment of the level of education and skills. A PAR was carried out with members of communities under the district adult education officers in three districts. The community action and reflection were the first result of the study. The results were not perhaps accurate, if judged in scientific standards, but the research process served the community directly and gave them and the development staff much needed information and guidance. The researchers wrote up the studies and could assess the accuracy and the benefits of the approach, but the ministries and the district offices were not ready to make use of the benefits of the study. It became clear to me that there must be institutional preparedness to act on the basis of the results gained at the community level.

A research team then involved itself in a PAR in one district of Tanzania for four years to study, reflect and work out understanding between the educational, veterinary and local government bureaucrats and villagers of four different ethnic groups after the government had carried out a villagization programme. The starting point was a request from the education officer who could not interest the pastoralists in education, which combined the interest of the people and authorities and gave the general direction to the study under the theme Development and Culture. The long time presence of Tanzanian and Finnish researchers in the communities and the accompanied activities made the research more effective than the earlier projects of a few months each had permitted. The interests and capabilities of the local pastoralists, which had been ignored or were in conflict with the planners, got different visibility. Their active participation in the common efforts to work on the causes of conflict affected a change in the attitudes of other ethnic groups and the officials toward them and on their attitudes toward education of their children.

At the time I started developing the participatory approach to research I was not aware of Paulo Freire's theory and practice in education for conscientization of the peasants in Latin America. Eventually the scholars and practitioners using similar approaches in different parts of the world, who saw the need of change in

research paradigm, found each other and keep in contact through an extensive network. I am perplexed that after all the work done with PAR and the evident successes in using it the main line social scientists still largely ignore it. Yet the present day social scene both in Europe and in developing countries is clearly in desperate need of change of paradigm. PAR cannot continue to be neglected if the present emphasis on democratic development and local government reforms is to succeed and economic development to take place, which does not aim only at growth in general terms but also at good life for ordinary citizens.