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People's Participation and Action Research in Community Development: Experiences From Nicaragua

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Introduction

The "Adult Education and Community Development Project" was designed to encourage the redefinition and restructuring of the Faculty of Humanities at the Central American University (UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua, as a centre for teaching, research and the promotion of social change. The principle aim of the project was to improve the quality of teaching and research work in the areas of adult education, community development and social research. It has been developed on the basis of an inter-university cooperation between the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Free University of Amsterdam and the Central American University (UCA) in Nicaragua.

In this article, we will examine some experiences during the period from 1984 to 1988 within one department, the School of Social Work. The first part of the article describes the development of a postgraduate course for professional workers entitled "Social Research and Popular Participation". The course was held at the Central American University (UCA) in Managua during 1985 and 1986 (Lammerink, 1993). It outlines the theoretical and methodological framework of the course: its initial diagnosis, theoretical framework and practical application. Emphasis is placed on the application of discovery learning as the didactic methodology applied. In the second part of this article, a combined approach of "discovery learning" and "participatory action research" in a fishermen's village on the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua is examined. Finally, examples are given of the application of participatory approaches to rural development in the training of professionals from countries in what has been termed the South.

Social research and popular participation: the theoretical framework

In his speech to the First Seminar on Social Work in Managua in 1985, the Nicaraguan Minister of Planning spoke about the basic objective of *community work*. He said it ought to be "to search, jointly with popular organizations, for just and efficient solutions to the people's problems". Community development, he said, should be guided by the principles of participatory planning which seeks to achieve participation in all stages of the programme: research, planning, coordination, organization, execution, evaluation and follow-up. Furthermore, he said there was the need for a particular type of *research*; research with a broad perspective and research which would act as a tool in the hands of the people, encouraging participation and a growth of awareness at the grass roots and of the grass roots. In this context, research becomes a process of getting to know and interpreting social reality, with the aim of gathering sufficient knowledge to allow for the reproduction, transformation and induction of new processes in society. Thus, research is a scientific practice, which promotes critical reflection on the nature of social reality and contributes to its transformation. Research becomes broader than just a receiver and transmitter of knowledge about immediate social reality; it allows the researchers and the subjects of research to establish a relationship of mutual support. Such an approach helps to change previous ways of drawing up and carrying out research projects. The people at the grass roots become active and conscious participants who, based on their local knowledge, are in a position to transform their own situation.

Taking into account this theoretical framework, the principal problem of the Faculty of Humanities was a structural one, since the Schools focused almost exclusively on teaching and, as a result, there were few academics with the necessary training to carry out research. Within this context, there was a need to form and train a team of teachers, professionals and students. An important requirement was a methodological approach to training and professional development which would be both sufficiently flexible and compatible with the task of the investigation. There were two main objectives in this training experience.

One was to carry out a programme of training, professional development and work experience which, it was hoped, would raise the level of scientific, technical and critical skills of the participants in the type of research required. The second was to establish research teams which would be capable of planning and carrying out short-, medium- and long-term research projects. To succeed in these objectives, it was agreed that certain fundamental conditions would have to be created:

- (a) The methodology should take as its starting point the knowledge and experiences of the participants and adapt this to the context as it went along.

- (b) The methodology should guide the participants during the course in a gradual process of transformation towards the design and implementation of an approach to social research and popular participation.
- (c) The work methods should be selected according to the specific inputs available and the outputs required.
- (d) A range of techniques should be used to optimise the learning process to stimulate participation, creativity and analysis among the participants.
- (e) An overall atmosphere of mutual trust and respect should be created in order to develop basic conditions for learning.

In "discovery learning" the experiences of the participants are seen as an important source of learning. Much of the training is based on *exchange*, *analysis* and *systematization* of these experiences. This means starting with the participant and working with the experiences they gained in their homes and work situations and not only with theories introduced by the trainers. Experience based on learning also means participants learning a lot from systematic reflection on what they do individually and inside the training group, which are essential skills to facilitate participatory approaches.

A system was proposed which involves three closely-related cycles for the training process. These would be tied together by a central theme "Training as it relates to Social Research and Popular Participation". In this first cycle, the formative/training process would take the concrete experiences of the participants as its starting point. The individuals would be able to reflect on these experiences and plan a new course of action, however limited it might be, which would integrate new "theoretical" elements into a common approach towards social research and popular participation. The second formative cycle would be that of analyzing the new experiences and experimenting with this approach. After this reflection and application, it would become possible to plan future courses of action based on broader foundations.

The training course was held at weekly intervals and each session lasted eight hours. It took place at the School of Social Work at the UCA between July 1985 and December 1986. During the course, 25 professionals participated from 12 different institutions, mainly in the areas of education, health, social welfare and agriculture. Each had to be "a professional, directly or indirectly linked to a popular organization". The first cycle was divided into three phases: diagnosis of practical experiences; theorising on practical experiences; and the development of a new form of action.

Diagnosis of practical experiences

In the first phase, we examined in some detail how participants conceived of social research. This exercise gave some interesting insights, which can be summarised as follows: "Research as a method of acquiring knowledge to transform reality", "Research as a means of achieving popular participa-

tion", "Research as an educational process", "Research as a strategy in national planning". From the beginning group techniques which encouraged the participation were used, such as "brainstorming", "sociodrama", and "mural newspaper". To stimulate favourable learning conditions the emphasis was put on the development of an open atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and commitment within the group.

The participants were then asked to describe and analyze their work experiences related to social research. The participants were stimulated and directed to describe their experiences by:

- asking well-chosen questions on their knowledge and ideas;
- performing tasks which reflected their working experience and practice;
- performing tasks to describe their individual working context, in collective presentations.

A central part of this step of the learning process was that their individual experiences were being expressed, discussed and "used" for further brainstorming within the group. The confrontation between ideas and reality made them aware of the many contradictions in their day-to-day activities.

Bearing in mind that the participants had had little research experience, they were then asked to draw up a blueprint for research and then to discuss in detail the contradictions which might arise in putting this blueprint into practice. In a final synthesis, each research team reflected on the experience. Examples of this reflection were as follows:

"The blueprint for the investigation which we drew up is still too tied to the traditional concepts of research work. The methodology of participation is not reflected in this blueprint."

"We lack the necessary theoretical elements to make research a strategy for popular participation. How are we to tailor these models to suit Nicaraguan reality?"

Many of the statements contain an element of questioning which the participants were beginning to express. They stimulated the need for further study in which the main question which would have to be answered would be: How does one relate social research to popular participation?

Theorizing on practical experiences

The initial findings of the triple diagnosis did, in fact constitute a new level of awareness and a different interpretation compared to the initial ideas. It was, however, the next stage which allowed us "to theorize on practical experience". It is the process in which their systematized knowledge was enriched with additional theory and experiences from other sources (articles, lectures, slides). One step involved the integration of theoretical notions into a blueprint for a research project. The result was a redefinition of three fundamental stages in a research process: the *identification* of a research question, the *critical* analysis of the problem, and the formulation

of *plans of action*, involving the subjects of the research. Following this, a comparison of different models of participatory action-research was made and discussed, which led to a new approach for social research and popular participation. Important in this process was an identification of key elements, causes and possible approaches. A high level of participation and interest was maintained by using various communication techniques.

In the activities carried out up to this point, we had completed the stages of action and reflection identified with the first diagnosis and the corresponding analysis which this set in motion. We now had to be coherent in the training approach, and initiate a stage of action. First, a model of participatory action research was defined, directly related to Nicaraguan reality and the work context. Then the model was put into practice and its coherence tested in three small research projects. Finally, the participants presented and evaluated the different projects, taking into account their content and results.

The second cycle started in July 1986. Again, we built on the participants' practical work. In this phase, we took stock of the progress and the results that had been achieved with the research model developed in the first cycle. Research projects were defined in the institutions where the participants worked. After a short training process, we started four different projects, three in *barrios populares* (poor neighbourhoods) in Managua and one in the port area of Corinto on the Pacific Coast. The research projects in the poor neighbourhoods aimed to start a joint training/research process together with the neighbourhood organizations to determine which were the most deeply-felt problems affecting the community. Then a plan of action was made together with the representatives of the responsible government agencies. We also tried to give training to the neighbourhood committees in such a way that, in the future, they would be able to cope better with their own problems.

The other project involved working with the National Harbour Board, in the development of a training course for foremen stevedores. As such, a participatory research programme was started, together with the senior stevedores, to systematize their experience and to integrate this knowledge into a course where these veterans were the course leaders. A process of group counselling, training and project execution also took place in the field. In planning the process, the following stages were taken into account: getting acquainted with the community, putting together a mixed research team (professionals and members of the community), defining research topics, training the team and designing the methods and techniques to be used in executing the research, feeding the results back into the community, and formulating action and evaluation.

Different applications of the approach

Since 1988, we have been working on ways to apply the methodology to a variety of situations, including participatory approaches to rural develop-

ment, the participatory planning of natural resources and the development of community forestry projects. One example is the participatory training methodologies related to rural development. Over the past two decades, opinions about the role and responsibility of professionals in the context of rural development have changed dramatically. There is an increasing demand for new initiatives which contribute to participatory, equitable, decentralised and self-sustaining processes of rural development. The challenge in rural development is to introduce a "new way of seeing" in order to be able to value farmers initiatives in land use systems and in local production. Such an understanding leads to operations by local farmers with help from professionals. This emphasizes the need for a participatory model of development in which local people are not just involved in the identification, formulation, implementation and evaluation of woody biomass projects, but where their knowledge and skills are the building blocks for development initiatives. To be able to enhance local initiatives, professionals need new approaches and skills for their jobs. They need to identify these initiatives and support local groups in interchanging their knowledge. They need to assist in developing sustained agricultural strategies, using participatory processes to make clear what are the local visions on existing problems and the changes that should take place. They need to distinguish interest groups and cooperate with farmers and others to make simple plans of action for immediate implementation (Van d. Gelder, 1991).

Based on our former experiences, we developed a new training approach that makes people aware of the importance of this new way of seeing farmers' initiatives and that, more importantly, focuses on the development of the participatory approaches that are needed to initiate and implement new production initiatives. This training approach should also give participants the confidence to apply different ways of designing and implementing rural development projects. This training approach was developed by FMD Consultants, and since 1988, has been applied in different courses: a 9-months Postgraduate Course in Forestry for Rural Development at the ITC in Enschede, The Netherlands, and a shortened training module "Aspectos Forestales en el Desarrollo Rural" at IGAC in Bogotá, Colombia. Also it has been the basis for a 6-weeks course "Enhancing local initiatives - participatory tools for social forestry". The training methodology is based on the same principles of learning from experience described earlier. The basic starting point is the participants' knowledge and experiences; their concrete social reality and their working context. The contradiction between what participants would like to develop and what they are actually developing is an essential input in the process of analyzing these experiences. Equally important is the investigation of specific social, economic and political conditions in their working context.

The second part of the training methodology consists of an exchange, analysis and systematic reflection of specific past experiences of the participants. In this way, participants become aware of other ways of seeing their

reality, and this increasing awareness provokes attitude changes leading them to view the landscape differently. The art of seeing consists of appreciation of the indigenous knowledge of farmers and the importance of this knowledge for intervention. The challenge as such is to encourage farmers to develop their own farms on the basis of their local knowledge.

The third part of the methodology takes into account the indigenous knowledge of farmers and combines the already existing knowledge of participants with new or additional knowledge offered by the trainers. These different elements constitute the components of a rural development process that is adapted to the local environment and the social conditions. Within this process, learning goes from concrete to abstract in terms of the analysis, and from general to specific in the intervention. Clearly therefore, learning by seeing and doing has more impact. An essential part of the methodology developed is to experiment with the new approaches under field conditions. Theory becomes related to practice improving the capacity for action. As a result, participants are able to adapt the new approach to their existing working context. The design and implementation of rural development projects in a different way changes the organization of institutions. For this reason, participants are trained in some necessary skills to promote organizational change and to multiply the experience gained in their own organization.

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