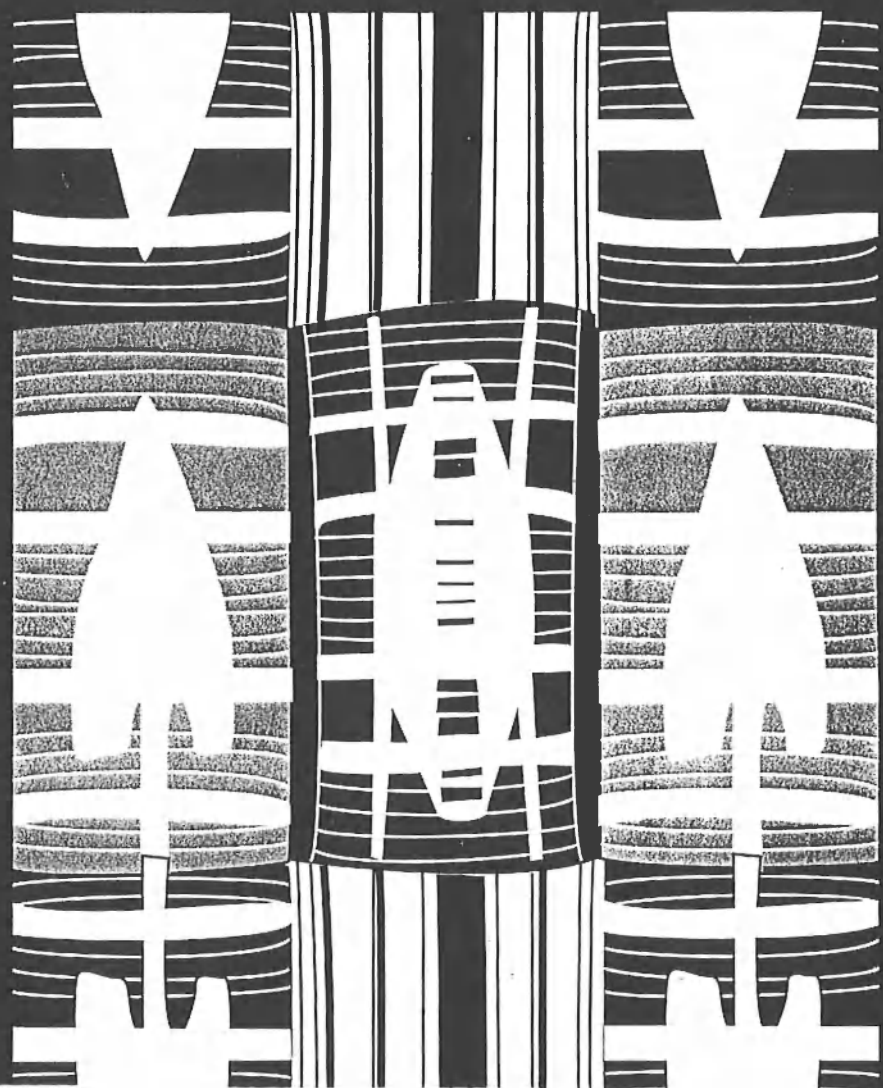


WHOSE VOICE ?

Participatory research and policy change

Edited by Jeremy Holland with James Blackburn

With a foreword by Robert Chambers



Foreword

ROBERT CHAMBERS

Whose Voice? presents a dramatic learning: it is that now, in the last years of the twentieth century, we have new ways in which those who are poor and marginalized can present their realities to those in power, and be believed, influence policy and make a difference.

The context

To many readers this will seem improbable. We live, after all, in a world of increasing polarization of power and wealth into North and South, into overclasses and underclasses. Materially, those in the overclasses have more and more, and are increasingly linked by instant communications. At the same time, the numbers in the underclasses of absolute poverty continue to rise. Among them, many millions have less and less, and remain isolated both from the overclass and from each other. Almost by definition, the poor and powerless have no voice. It may be politically correct to say that they should be empowered and their voices heard. But cynical realists will point to inexorable trends, vested interests and pervasive self-interest among the powerful, and argue that little can be changed.

The contributors to this book present evidence of new potentials to the contrary. They confront that cynicism with their own promising experience. They have found that there are new ways to enable those who are poor, marginalized, illiterate and excluded to analyse their realities and express their priorities; that the realities they express of conditions, problems, livelihood strategies and priorities often differ from what development professionals have believed; and that new experiences can put policymakers in closer touch with those realities.

These potentials come from participatory research in which the poor themselves are active analysts. This has a long pedigree, not least in the traditions of participatory action research and the inspiration of Paulo Freire and his followers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a confluence of older streams of research together with new inventions evolved as a family of approaches and methods known as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). This has spread fast and wide. It is now often urban and frequently much more than appraisal. It has been applied in all continents, and many countries and contexts.

PRA stresses changes in the behaviour and attitudes of outsiders, to become not teachers but facilitators, not lecturers but listeners and learners. 'Hand over the stick', 'Use your own best judgement at all times' and 'They can do it' (having confidence in the abilities of local people, whether literate or not) are among its sayings. When well conducted, PRA approaches and methods are often open-ended, visual as well as verbal,

and carried out by small groups of local people. They have proved powerful means of enabling local people, including the poor, illiterate, women and the marginalized, themselves to appraise, analyse, plan and act. While some consider that PRA should always be part of an empowering process, others have used the methods for research, to learn more and more accurately about the realities of the poor.

As PRA evolved, it soon became evident that it had applications for policy. Thematic and sectoral studies were carried out and presented as reports to decisionmakers, sometimes in only days or weeks from the fieldwork. The World Bank, through trust funds from bilateral donors, initiated participatory poverty assessments (PPAs). Some of these used PRA methods to enable poor people to express their realities themselves. The insights from these thematic studies and PPAs were often striking, convincing and unexpected. A quiet revolution was taking place in parallel in different parts of the world, but it was too scattered for full mutual learning or for its significance to be fully seen.

Through support from Swiss Development Cooperation, an international workshop was convened at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, over the two days 13–14 May 1996, to share and review relevant experience with PRA and policy. Some 50 participants of 26 nationalities took part. The papers and discussions from that workshop, with Jeremy Holland as the main editor, provide the core of this book, updated and augmented by new material from this rapidly evolving field.

A related workshop a few days later drew together experience on the institutionalizing of participatory approaches. A companion volume, *Who Changes?* with James Blackburn as the main editor, similarly presents and analyses much learning from recent experience. It finds that PRA and related participatory approaches have presented many challenges – ethical, institutional and personal, especially as they go to scale with large organizations. It concludes with a bottom line that how good development is depends on what sort of people ‘we’ – development professionals – are. *Who Changes?* and *Whose Voice?* are part of a sequence of publications which draw on PRA-related experience.

In reading *Whose Voice?* there is excitement to be found, and a certain exhilaration. For one realizes gradually that there has been a breakthrough. Many questions are raised. Among these, certain insights and issues stand out and deserve comment, among these methods and ethics and the realities revealed.

Methods and ethics

With participatory research, and especially with PRA, methods and ethics are intertwined; issues raised are of time taken, expectations aroused and whose realities are expressed. Several writers agonize over whether the research process is exploitative. Participatory research is time-consuming for local people: PRA methods, especially the visual ones like mapping, diagramming and matrices, tend to be fun and to engage people’s full attention, but sometimes for hours; and poor people’s time is not costless. Expectations are also liable to be raised. After being helped to analyse

foreword

their conditions, problems and opportunities, people often expect action, but with facilitators in a policy research mode, and not concerned with planning for action, follow-up may not be feasible.

No solutions can be universal, but two points are widely agreed:

- *Transparency*: facilitators should make clear from the start who they are, what they are doing, and why, and what can and cannot be expected; often, even when nothing can be expected, local people will collaborate, not least because they find the activities interesting and enjoyable, and themselves learn from them.
- *Selection for follow-up*: communities and groups can be chosen where responsible follow-up may be possible through an on-going programme.

A further concern is whose reality is being presented, and whose reality counts. Those most accessible to outsiders in communities are usually men, and those who are less poor, less marginalized, less excluded. Women are often continuously busy. Ensuring that the excluded are included, and that their reality is expressed, can demand patience, persistence, tact and inconvenience. The best times for poor women are, for example, often the worst times for outsiders.

There is then the question of how their reality is analysed, and into whose categories. (Researchers tend to fit material into preconceived concepts.) The Management Committee of the South African PPA set an example of best practice by going to pains not to impose their categories and constructs on the material. Instead, through card sorting, they allowed the categories and constructs to emerge from the material, and then to influence the structure of the report, which they wrote as spokespersons for the poor.

Realities revealed

Much of the power of PRA methods lies in what has been called group-visual synergy. Group activities include: making maps, lists, matrices, causal and linkage diagrams, estimating, comparisons, ranking and scoring, and discussing and debating. Realities are expressed in a cumulative physical and visual form, often democratically, on the ground. Typically, people become committed to the process and lose themselves in it. Visually, more diversity and complexity are expressed than can be put into words. Much in the contributions to this book was first presented visually.

The realities revealed in both the thematic studies and the PPAs are often striking. Once stated they seem obvious, but it is sobering to recognize that for urban-based professionals they have usually been new insights, or understanding presented with new force and credibility. To take examples in turn from the thematic studies:

- In Nepal, in the Tarai (plains) area, the continuous introduction of irrigation and of new crop varieties led to yield increases, but was masking long-term declines in soil fertility.
- In Guinea, contrary to officials' views, indigenous land-tenure systems persisted and were complex and diverse.

- In The Gambia, 25 per cent of girls of school age were found to be overlooked at the village level because they were pregnant, married or about to be married; girls cared deeply and bitterly about the denial of education.
- In Jamaica, poverty and violence are interconnected in complex ways, including area stigma, which hinders those from a neighbourhood with a reputation for violence from getting jobs; interpersonal violence is far more common than political or drug-related violence.
- In India, local people understood the ecology of a national park better than conservation-minded professionals; excluding buffaloes in the name of conservation both damaged their livelihoods and led to a decrease in bird life in the park.

The PPAs were similarly revealing: in Ghana, infrastructure was found to be a higher priority for rural people than had been recognized; in Zambia, school fees had to be paid at the worst time of the year, coinciding with high incidence of sickness and hard work, and shortages of money and food; in South Africa, seasonal deprivation, urban as well as rural, was more significant than had been supposed; in Bangladesh, in a subsequent PPA sponsored by UNDP, enforcement of anti-dowry laws was a surprise priority of poor people. These are illustrative examples from reports rich in policy-relevant detail. The evidence is abundant that these approaches and methods, used well, elicit insights into previously hidden realities of the poor.

Whose Voice? deserves to be read, studied and acted upon by all who are concerned with poverty and policy, in whatever context, country or continent. Its lessons transcend the boundaries of professions, disciplines, sectors and departments. It indicates actions open to NGOs, governments and all agencies concerned with deprivation and with development. It shares seminal experiences, rather than set answers. It is for readers to select from these what makes sense for their purposes, and to go further themselves.

Let me hope that this book will encourage and inspire many others to join the pioneers who write here, to explore more of this new territory, and to share their experiences with the same disarming frankness. It may then be that the voices and realities of those who have been last – the poor, powerless, marginalized and excluded – will come to count and to change policy both in principle and in practice.

WHOSE VOICE?

*Participatory research and
policy change*

Edited by
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JAMES BLACKBURN

with a Foreword by ROBERT CHAMBERS

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