

## **Interview with John Gaventa, Director of Research at the Institute of Development Studies.**

**Gaventa:** My name is John Gaventa. I am the director of research at the Institute of Development Studies. I have worked for some 30 years on issues of participatory research and citizen-led research.

**Question:** Could you give me some background on how citizen-led research has come about?

**Gaventa:** Well, what we now call citizen-led research has had a lot of different labels attached to it over the years. Some people use the language of ‘participatory research,’ some people use the language of participatory learning and action, some people use the language of participatory action research. So there is a lot of different labels. For me the important moment, actually, was 35 years ago in Tanzania, when at a conference with Julius Nyerere then the President of Tanzania, and Paulo Freire, the famous adult educator from Brazil. Freire gave a very important talk where he said that if we expect people to become the subjects or creators of their own history, then they can no longer be simply the objects of somebody else’s research. That people should become active for themselves in doing their own research and creating their own knowledge which informs their action. And that is the first time that we know that the phrase of participatory research was used; at that conference in adult education, in Africa, and over the next 30 or 40 years it spread all over the world and now is being used under these different terms in many different disciplines in many many different ways. But basically what we mean by it is that the people, who are being studied, actually play a role as citizens, as agents of their own action in the knowledge production and dissemination and creation process.

**Question:** How is it different from the researcher-led model?

**Gaventa:** Well, many of us researchers have been taught to think that we do research by ourselves and that it is something that we control. I like to distinguish between four different models of research. One is what we call the research on the people approach. In that approach the researcher comes up with a question that they think is important. The researcher figures out the methodology, the researcher goes and collect the data maybe with interviewing people or observing people. The researcher does the analysis and the researcher then publishes it and somebody else picks it up and uses it. So in that researcher-led approach, the control of the entire process rests in the hand of the expert. And it therefore creates a kind of hierarchy and distance between the researcher and the people who are being researched. Now there are other variations on that historic received model; many people talk about the research ‘for’ people approach. And, in that sense, the researcher may decide that they want to engage with the users more, they want to respond to what the users they have researched want in terms of research topic, in terms of something that will be useful for them but it still has the control of the research in the researchers hands and the people or recipients or client themselves are still the passive objects of somebody else’s research. The citizen-led model begins to move beyond that and

talks about ways that researchers work with people or even the ways that people do the research for themselves. And that's the shift that we are beginning to see between a researcher led model and a more which is usually 'on' people or 'for' people to a more citizen-led model which is usually 'with' people or 'by' people themselves.

### **Question: How would citizens participate in citizen-led research?**

**Gaventa:** Well, there's many ways that the citizens can participate in the research process. We like to think about the role of citizen engagement or participation throughout the whole research cycle. The first step oftentimes is who identifies what the research question is, who chooses the topic.

In a researcher-led model, it is the researcher who scans the literature and say 'Oh, this is an interesting question,' and they go out and create the research project. In the citizen-led model, we try to begin with those questions or issues or concerns that are closest to the people involved. So the first step is listening to people and hearing what they think are the right questions; so they play a role in setting the agenda.

The second place they can play a role is helping to figure out how to design their research and how can we get useful information and data on whatever the topic is. Again, oftentimes, researchers who usually come from the outside may have a certain way of collecting data, but it is actually the people in those communities who may know best what kinds of approaches will work, may know how are the fonts of wisdom and knowledge on that particular topic and may have more informal and community embedded ways of doing research.

Then thirdly, there's the whole question of gathering the knowledge in and of itself, of gathering the research, of gathering the data. Oftentimes, in participatory projects this is where people start getting involved in fact the researcher has to find the topic but they go and ask the community to help them gather the data. In this case, the data gathering is very important but it can be done by the people in the communities who can do almost any kind of research. They can do surveys, they can do participant observation; they can gather documents, they can do experiments. So, this third area is involvement, engagement and actually the data collection.

The fourth area I think is one that's most important and that is in giving meaning to the evidence and data that has been required. Oftentimes, if it is the researchers they will go and do the interviews in the community, do the surveys put it all together, go away and think about it. But when they take it out of the context they really don't have the advantage of hearing the knowledge of people in the community to help interpret what's significant about the research themselves. So involving the people in the meaning giving process, in the analysis process, in trying to figure out which if the multiple forms of finding are most significant, is the third and very important way where involvement can take place by citizens in this kind of model. And the fourth really is the use in communication of research.

Oftentimes, this is the last stage and this is where researchers publishes it and then somebody else disseminates it, and then audiences may pick it up and use it. In this citizen-led model, citizens have been involved all the way through the process so they already know about the research. They already own the research and they are already then very

equipped, and usually highly motivated and enthusiastic about going and sharing that research and putting it into practice.

So these four steps are at least four very important steps where citizens can play a role figuring out what is most important to research, in the first place, figuring out the methods that work best within their setting, helping to gather the information as researchers, helping to analyse it and giving meaning to it and then finally communicating and using it to help solve the problems or the issues that the research is about.

**Question: What is the role of the researcher in citizen-led research?**

**Gaventa:** So, oftentimes when we talk about citizen-led research, questions comes up. Well, what is the role of the researcher if the communities or the citizens are doing this all for themselves? In fact, there are lots of roles, but they are oftentimes very different from the more traditional researcher roles. There is a role...first of all, the role is one of a collaborator or a partner, not one of a final decision maker or expert. That means changing a hierarchy; that means changing the relationship to a more democratic or more equal one that oftentimes exists in traditional hierarchical research projects where the researcher is usually set more on a pedestal. When you are changing that relationship, the researcher can do a lot. The researcher can help listen and ask questions about identifying the most important research question. Doesn't mean they identify the question, but they can probe and prod and ask and facilitate conversations to help surface those important questions. The researcher can help coach people about how you gather data. The researcher can bring experiences from outside the community. Even in citizen-led research, the researcher has knowledge which can be shared; it is not that they hold that knowledge back, but it is shared as a co-participant, it is shared as a member of the group, not as somebody who is simply an expert from the outside. The researcher can help facilitate the process, the researcher sometimes brings technical skills, how do you put a good survey together or how you do a good interview or how you write up a really excellent report. They do that with the participants and then, oftentimes, very importantly the researcher can help take the findings and share them with communities and audiences that are beyond the reach of the people who are directly involved.

So there is still a very important role, but it is that role of a facilitator, of a coach, of a co-producer of knowledge, of an interpret, and those are oftentimes roles that researchers are not trained to do in their normal research methods courses. So it means taking on and learning a different set of skills than what we were trained to do. We were taught how to do survey design and how to ask the right research question and how to write the perfect article and we assume that the whole process rested in our own hands.