

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

BACKGROUND

Today there is widely held opinion that it is necessary to enlarge the circle of participants in decision making processes, when decisions somehow affect all members of some community.

When the president N. Sarkozy proposed the same idea at the forum in Davos nobody objected. He said that we have to leave this civilization of experts and to start discussing the problems together.

This opinion generated a powerful trend of expanding participation, enlargement of the circle of participants in decision making, including involvement of people experiencing poverty.

And now we have many examples for such practices.

I would mention first of all EAPN and its efforts to select and disseminate good practices - including the personal contribution of Tanya.

As for the driving forces of this trend I would like to emphasize especially one of the basic points of EAPN's work – the idea that “The actual forms of representative democracy don't allow citizens to influence and control the political decision making process”.

This deficiency of the representative democracy has devastating consequences for all citizens – for societies as a whole – but not only for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. From this point of view participation of poor people is not only a tool for protection of their interests, but a tool for their possible contribution to achievement of improvements (prosperity) for all.

These visions are so strong that even World Bank reacted producing several books on different fields and forms of participation – for instance, “Participatory Poverty Assessments” or “Participatory Budgeting”. Of course WB doesn't accept the fact of fundamental deficiency of representative democracy and the political decision making process. In the opinion of WB this is not a problem of Western democracies but only for developing countries.

THE PROBLEM

Many people agree that participation is basic, authentic and most effective form of social inclusion.

But it seems there is a problem with participation. The problem becomes obvious if we take into account the well known fact that there is something important in the basis of the decision making – and this “something” is our knowledge in the field we take decision. If the people involved in decision making don't possess solid knowledge, they are helpless participant in decision making process. That is why some observers say that participation without solid, generic knowledge is similar to taking people as hostages – involving them in a process that they cannot control.

When our knowledge is reduced or distorted, than unavoidably the decision will be also distorted.

Here is the problem or – perhaps – the problems.

1. The knowledge we dispose is incomplete, uncertain and even – intentionally distorted. – Especially social knowledge, produced by the dominant steams of social sciences. Stefano Zamani already indicated the harmful effects of the research of the last ten winners of the Nobel Prize for economics. Or the case of the eminent economist Rogoff whose analysis stimulated the implementation of austerity measures – it turned out that his analysis is completely fake.

2. Something more, there is a tendency of increasing the non-knowledge and ignorance. Eminent scientists predict that if our societies don't change this tendency, than the future of the societies will be determined by the lack of knowledge

3. The public at large, including the poor people are not professional producers of knowledge and they cannot identify existing distortions. Of course they possess important knowledge, they possess also something important – authentic moral values, but these resources are not enough to make good decisions.

Then, what's the solution?

The solution of this problem is to involve the poor people (and other groups also) in the very process of knowledge production – that is the “step before decision making” and to combine it with the decision making..

There is very strong scientific support for this type of research, from an influential stream of social research – the risk analysis. Researchers from this stream openly state that traditional sciences don't and cannot produce adequate knowledge and the way to solve this problem is post-normal or post-academic science. Basic feature of this new science is the joint work of professional researchers and segments of the public at large including – of course – the poor people.

This is the essence of participatory action research.

The main idea of participatory action research is to use a scientific approach to study important social problems together with people experiencing them.

Conventional, traditional social science aims at producing new knowledge by professional researchers that solve scientific problems.

Participatory action research also produces new knowledge – both:

- knowledge contributing to practical solutions of immediate problems and general knowledge, including theories

- Alliance between professional researchers and people that are not professionals ordinary members of society. PAR involves people that experience the problems in the process of knowledge production. And this means involvement of two other important resources – moral values and knowledge (even “non-scientific”) of those that experience the problems;

For me (and not only for me) this is the most fundamental form of PARTICIPATION – it is participation in the sense of co-managing of the research process, combined with co-generating problem solutions and new knowledge.

HOW

The classical model of PAR has several main elements (or characteristics)

1. Action research assumes that ordinary members can generate valid knowledge as partners in a systematic empirical inquiry based on their own categories and frameworks for understanding and explaining their world. Insiders' own cognitive map or local theory can be as legitimate and as useful in scientific investigation as that of the researcher.
2. Problems usually are defined by “system members” who experience them. “Problem owners” are considered as insiders; researchers – more or less, as outsiders. Since intellectual inquire begins with the problematic situation, the traditional theory – practice sequence is reversed. In this way those who define the problems (decide what is problem and what is not) play a leading role in the research.

3. Another aspect of the role of people experiencing the problems is the use of the so called “tacit knowledge”, local knowledge (theory), “non-scientific” knowledge and the impact of their moral values.
4. Problems solving require interdisciplinary research and as a consequence - AR is “inherently interdisciplinary”. Problem definition is not limited to the concepts, theories etc. of a particular discipline, but rather is grounded in the participant’s definition of the context.
5. Some people emphasize also another element of PAR – dissemination of the knowledge, acquired through PAR.
6. PAR is a change and generates a vision of how society, or local community, or organization could be improved. It is about change that has positive social value. Action research rather than being “value neutral”, selects problems and generates solutions that would contribute to both general knowledge and practice solutions, based on democratic, humanistic values.

3. Example for participatory research.

Usually researchers mention two traditions of PAR. The “Southern” tradition is committed to community transformations through empowering disempowered groups.

The “Northern” tradition is concerned with reforming organizations.

The example I will present shows that this distinction is relative, at least in some cases. The example is an action research project in rural Norway – “Creating Networks for Rural Economic Development in Norway”.

Mayors of three municipalities in rural region were concerned about how to encourage large national electronic companies to create subsidiaries in the region. They initiated an AR process where key people in the communities could interact and collectively use their creativity and skills to create a network of business and public activity based on local resources.

4. Do we (NN) need such instrument?

- Participatory research as a tool for influence and participation – perhaps we don’t possess better tool; other possible gains – way for involvement of the poor people etc.; fields (problems) of implementation, that are most important for us – this could be mainly even only discussion with some common final conclusions.

5. What NN can do in order to develop large practical implementation of the method at national and European level – identification of barriers and proposals for further activities. This is also only discussion.

For instance a group of university teachers, volunteers and activists of the Movement ATD Quart Monde¹, several years ago begun започват опити да докажат, че има алтернатива на сегашната ситуация, която се характеризира с това, че мненията (знанието и ценностите) на мъжете и жените живеещи в бедност и изключване, не се вземат предвид, а тяхното състояние се разглежда през призмата (дълбоко подвеждаща) на недостиг на материални ресурси, от които те страдат – именно в такъв контекст им се предлага да сътрудничат за прилагане на решения, които други са взели вместо тях – перфектен пример за едновременно изключване от създаване на знание и вземане на решения, въз основа на създаденото чрез изключване знание.

Основната цел на сътрудничеството на: изследователите от различни дисциплини; професионалистите в областта на основните човешки права и хората живеещи в крайна бедност е да се покаже, че взаимодействието, реципрочността, конфронтацията между трите групи актьори, носители на различни знания, могат да променят начина по който се осмислят социалните реалности, т.е. – начинът, по който се правят изследвания, а следователно – и начинът по който се правят политики (се вземат решения и се действия). За постигането на тази цел са въведени две френско-белгийски програми: Quart Monde-Universite и Quart Monde Partenaire.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Crisis of human rationality? Knowledge?

They treat us as mushrooms – they keep us in the dark and feed us on manure. John Lennon

Stephen Lyng writes about “...widely held sentiment that we are living in a time of unprecedented danger. Although the chances of early death or disability are probably no greater today than in any other period of human history, the dangers we currently face are unique in two respects: they are largely humanly produced and they impact us collectively rather than individually”.

It is possible to distinguish 2 types of dangers.

“Many of the dangers we face today emerge as unanticipated consequences of economic and scientific progress”. We can say that these type of dangers are due to lack of enough and adequate knowledge about the consequences of the human actions. These dangers endanger us collectively – as societies.

But there is another type of dangers: they are anticipated by some individuals and groups and unanticipated by others; expected by some people and unexpected by others. This second type of dangers is the main subject of our interest.

These events are dangers only for those that don't expect them, don't know them and probably don't desire them. But the same events are not dangers for those individuals or groups that expect and perhaps – desire them. Even if those that anticipate the dangers don't profit of dangers, they at least have the opportunities to undertake some preliminary activities in order to avoid the dangers or to alleviate the damages, dangers can cause. The others – those that are unaware of dangers are helpless when face the unexpected events.

Because of these differences we can say that this type of dangers are socially differentiated dangers – they are dangers for some social strata, but not for all of them.

¹ ATD Quart Monde – Ateliers du Croisement des Savoirs et de Pratiques – 57 rue de Venise – 51100 Reims (Fr).

Public policies are a field where the socially differentiated dangers appear very clearly. For instance, researches in this field note growing discrepancies between expected and unexpected effects of public policies. They emphasize also growing discrepancies between announced and unannounced aims of public policies.

As an example for these dangers Lyng mentions the "... broad based political changes in western societies towards "neoliberal" policies and programs, which have shifted more of responsibility for dealing with life challenges – such as unemployment, health, aging problems etc. – from collectivities to individuals"

We can agree with Lyng but not completely. The truth is that political changes not only shifted social risks from collectivities to individuals; they generated more risks and transformed them into dangers because policies didn't create effective systems for neutralization of risks and heavier

What is the basis of the social differentiation of dangers?

Dangers – lack of enough adequate knowledge?

Differentiation – differentiated knowledge

Knowledge production – subordinated to group interests; knowledge supports the interests of some groups – distorted knowledge.

ATELIER DE CONSTRUCTION DE SCÉNARIOS PROSPECTIFS

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> *Animé par Véronique Lamblin et François de Jouvenel*

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> *OBJECTIFS*

> *L'objectif de cette formation est de permettre aux participants, à*

> *travers un travail collectif, de s'approprier très pragmatiquement la*

> *méthode des scénarios comme instrument d'exploration des futurs*

> *possibles.*

> *Après un bref rappel des concepts et des méthodes, un exercice*

> *collectif sera engagé en trois étapes :*

> *• Identification et hiérarchisation des variables clés*

> *• Élaboration d'hypothèses prospectives sur les évolutions*

> *possibles des variables*

> *• Construction de scénarios prospectifs*

1. Where and why Kurt Lewin created this type of research? – a) In the US Army; b) his aim was to create a mechanism for solving problems that cannot be solved in another way.

A comment about these facts. Army is built on strong hierarchies. In such structures the claims of the individuals from the low hierarchical levels cannot reach the "top" where decisions are made. These claims cannot be even expressed – there are not mechanisms for this. Two important effects can result from such situation – increasing discontent of the low levels, as well as increasing mistakes of decision making at the highest levels. This destructive tendency is unacceptable and then Lewin invented and proposed participatory research. It is not just research, but a form of influence (even a kind of indirect participation in some areas of decision making process) that doesn't erode hierarchies (in the army this is not possible).

2. Do our societies need such an instrument?

(The leading idea is to emphasize that participatory research is not only for “us” – it is useful and necessary for our societies as a whole, but not only for the poor people and their organizations.)

A) If there are strong hierarchies (formal or informal) in a given society then PR is useful and even necessary instrument. As for the former socialists – no doubt, they (we) need this instrument, mainly because of the lack of effective democratic institutions and really democratic political decision making process. Even in countries with old democratic traditions there are claims for more democracy.

The expected result of this situation is present – political decision making process is in trouble. Probably most of us would agree that policies – especially economic and social – during the last 3-4 decades are more or less wrong. At least more and more people don't approve these policies.

B) Do we believe governmental experts? Why N. Sarkozy proposed “... to leave the civilization of experts and to start to discuss problems together”?

The big problem of our societies is that not only policies - the knowledge is also in trouble

We can understand this problem by asking the question “Why policies (or at least large segments of them) are wrong”? The easiest answer (because of the influence of those that profit from such policies) is right but not enough and its pragmatic value is restricted, because we cannot derive good ideas for action.

Two of the brightest brains of the American economic analysis emphasize a more fundamental factor – the knowledge that societies (including decision makers) possess and use: “Everything we do is determined by our uncertain knowledge”. But knowledge and knowledge producers are also in trouble. Ironically (“Knowledge”???) societies don't possess reliable knowledge that can provide a solid basis for political decision making.

For instance the famous research of Rogoff that provided scientific basis for budget discipline and austerity measures – it turned out that his research is full of mistakes.

What is the solution of this knowledge problem? Most advanced scientific research confirms the proposal of Sarkozy – researchers propose development of new type of sciences – post-academic (or post-normal) sciences.

These very essence of the new sciences is Participation; they are PARTICIPATORY sciences.

So, participatory research is not only useful for the lowest levels in societies, for the powerless (disempowered) to influence decision making (policies). It is a frontline research - basic line of knowledge advancing and reform of sciences themselves.

3. Examples for participatory research – from the literature.

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Conclusion underlining the main characteristics of the method

4. Do we (NN) need such instrument? - Participatory research as a tool for influence and participation – perhaps we don't possess better tool; other possible gains – way for involvement of the poor people etc.; fields (problems) of implementation, that are most important for us – this could be mainly even only discussion with some common final conclusions.

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