RESEARCH, COMMITMENT AND ACTION:  
THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

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‘The world of the everyday life of the oppressed is not merely a sphere of social reproduction, but is crossed over by numerous breaks and cleavages with the dominant order; and that although these points of rupture are most often contradictory or partial, they concern the most intimate and long lasting logic of the social struggle.’

Jose Nun, *The Rebellion of the Chorus*

‘Sous le familier, découvrez l’insolite
Sous le quotidien, découvrez l’inexplicable
Puissé toute chose dite habituelle vous inquiéter
Dans la règle découvrez l’abus
Et partout où l’abus s’est montré
Trouvez le remède’

Bertold Brecht, *L’exception et la règle*

**Abstract** — The author discusses the development and practice of participatory research as both a method and strategy of social investigation and social action within an adult education framework. Participatory research is compared with traditional research strategies, and its defining principles are outlined, together with specific examples of its application and practical issues both today and in the future.
Introduction

Adult educators and community workers in many parts of the world have understood the substance of Nun and Brecht's well-articulated statements for many years. They have done so not because they have been full-time theoreticians or political philosophers, but because they have been working on a day-to-day basis with people who have been trying to learn in order to improve and control their own, and their communities', everyday life.

Because of the nature of adult education practice, it has always been a rich source for ideas, methods and strategies which have application to larger social movements. Participatory research is only one of the several such social innovations which have arisen in recent years.

Participatory research, as a term, was first used in Tanzania (Hall, 1978) as a practice; however, many people in various parts of the world either identified their own work with the concept or were stimulated by the ideas to begin developing work along similar lines. Beginning with a special issue of its journal, Convergence, in 1975, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) has encouraged people engaged in participatory research to work together and exchange ideas and information. A network was established in 1977 with coordinators in various parts of the world which has continued to function ever since. An up-date of network activities, issues and publications is available in another special issue of Convergence (Convergence, 1982).

For adult educators, non-formal educators, researchers concerned with implementation and action towards social or structural transformation, the combination of concepts which are brought together under the term participatory research remain fascinating, critical and controversial. Participatory research has most often been described as a three-pronged activity which integrates a research process (social investigation) with educational work through an action designed to deal with specific problems. It inevitably raises profound questions about the nature of knowledge (What is it? Who produces it? Why?); education (How? What for? By whom?); and power (What is it? How does one get it?).

Participatory research has arisen as a result of a combination of critiques and challenges. On one hand, the frustration of many social scientists and educators operating with positivistic and empiricist models of research, and on the other, educators and others seeking concrete ways to be engaged in education and action which works explicitly on behalf of oppressed and marginalized people.

Researchers, particularly in the Third World, had become disenchanted with research which purported to produce objective knowledge about people and social conditions while using methods which distorted that very real-