Evaluating Participatory Research Supported by the International Development Research Centre

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An analysis of IDRC’s experience with participatory research (PR) identifies 145 projects with significant PR content that were supported over the past twenty-five years. An eight-part classification is devised, a scheme which can be applied to contemporary as well as historical projects. A detailed examination of twenty-five projects is used to develop a new framework for assessing PR. This framework involves eight general and thirty specific factors that can influence levels of success. The IDRC projects reveal that PR is changing significantly, that it can be a highly effective approach to achieving sustainable results, and that it requires special forms of planning, training, and evaluation if that success is to be realized.

Introduction

This article is derived from research undertaken for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) during 1994–1995. The research culminated in a comprehensive assessment of IDRC’s support for Participatory Research (PR) over its entire history (Found 1995). This article will: focus on those aspects of the larger study that concern the identification, classification, and evaluation of PR; present a framework that might be used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating future projects; and outline the circumstances under which PR may be particularly appropriate or inappropriate. The article, therefore, concerns the design and implementation of future projects as much as it presents a substantive evaluation of past efforts. It also focuses on the evaluation of PR projects rather than on participatory evaluation. Although participatory evaluation would normally be the ideal forum for assessing PR, it has been rarely used, at least as a formal method, in the projects supported by IDRC.

Methodology

To evaluate PR projects supported by IDRC, a unique methodology was developed. IDRC, for most its history, did not identify those projects with
PR content, and a method had to be devised to identify such projects after the fact. Similarly, a method of classifying PR projects had to be devised because existing classifications described in the literature were of limited use. Further, neither IDRC nor other agencies had developed a specific framework for assessing the character or success of PR projects—a gap that this project had to overcome.

The analysis of IDRC’s PR projects proceeded according to the following seven steps: 1) IDRC’s computer database was analyzed to scan each of the agency’s 5,506 projects (going back to 1975) to identify, through key words, all of the projects that had a PR component. 2) A special database (SDB), listing twenty-three variables for each of the 145 IDRC PR projects that were identified, was devised for detailed analysis (for example, to determine the types of PR involved in each project). 3) The 145 projects were subdivided into eight basic types, based on an analysis of the SDB. 4) After the analysis of the SDB, and interviews with several IDRC Project Officers, 15 of the 145 PR projects were selected for detailed analysis. The fifteen projects included a range of types, international locations, size, budget, complexity, anticipated levels of success, and forms of PR. The analysis included a thorough examination of each project’s hard-copy file and several interviews with relevant project officers and principal investigators. The seven projects located in Kenya were also assessed by the investigator through site visits. 5) Forty-one of the world’s major agencies involved in sponsoring development activities were asked to provide information concerning their evaluation of projects that involved PR. This survey was intended to generate new information concerning the evaluation of PR and to help place the activities of IDRC within a broader context. 6) Similarly, the computer databases for several agencies were analyzed to determine the numbers and types of PR projects that had received support and to provide a comparative basis for examining IDRC’s record. 7) A review of the latest literature concerning the field of PR was undertaken to place the experiences of IDRC within a broader, worldwide setting.

Identifying PR Projects through Key Words

Although the use of key words was useful (and the only method available) to identify PR projects in the computer databases of IDRC and other agencies, its use was limited because of variations in the use and meanings of PR terms. To begin with, the terms participatory research, participatory development, action research, action learning, and the many other terms that have been associated with PR were practically unknown during the early stages of IDRC’s existence and could not be expected to appear in computer files. Some unidentified forms of PR were, no doubt, present in some projects (for example, those concerned with community development, farming-systems research, or indigenous experimentation with crop varieties) but went undetected by key-word searches. Conversely, one suspects that popular PR terms came into particularly heavy use later in the 1980s and the 1990s, partly in response to the preference by some agencies to sponsor projects