Perils on the Road to Participatory Research in Community Forestry

Carl Wilmsen

ABSTRACT. Although collaboration, participation, and participatory research are now touted as crucial processes in the pursuit of sustainability, recent scholarship suggests that they may not help empower people to engage more meaningfully in forest management. Indeed, experience with participatory research (PR) suggests that its central elements are not themselves sufficient to successfully advance this goal. There are many challenges in conducting PR, not the least of which is assuring that participation is truly meaningful. The key to overcoming this challenge lies in the approach, not the method. This approach requires attention to power relations, the epistemology underpinning the research, and the research process itself. But above all, it requires a firm commitment to using the research process to enhance the ability of people affected by the phenomenon under study to use the research results to improve their own situation in ways that they choose.
KEY WORDS. Participatory research, participation, research methods-community forestry

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration, participation, participatory research. These words evoke visions of a well-functioning democracy in which informed citizens, scientists, and government officials cooperate convivially and share decision-making authority over matters important to the lives of the people involved in the process. Indeed, participation is now touted as a crucial process in the pursuit of sustainability. All over the world economic development institutions (the World Bank, the United Nations, NGOs), government agencies, industry, and resource-dependent communities are embracing participation as a means of promoting sustainable management of forests and other natural resources.

Yet, recent scholarship suggests that all is not well in paradise. For example, in a theme-review paper he wrote for a workshop on community-based conservation in 1993, Marshall Murphree observed that out of fifteen case studies presented at the workshop,

only two were endogenously conceived and initiated by communities. Murphree suggested that this paradox may have occurred because "the institutionalization of conservation as a discrete set of concerns and actions is a product of governments, interest group organizations and scholarship" (Murphree 1993, page 2) and that efforts to involve communities in it are efforts to co-opt community support for conservation objectives that originate outside the community. Similarly, Cooke and Kothari's (2001) review of recent experience with participation in development leads them to wonder whether participation has actually become a new orthodoxy that does more to maintain inequities in access to resources and political power than it does to empower people to gain a greater degree of control over their own destinies than they previously enjoyed.

Participatory research suffers from these same problems. Scholars have pointed out the difficulty communities have encountered in reaching out to disenfranchised community members (Schafft and Greenwood 2002), suggested that PR may be used in ways that exclude community members from decisions about how research results are applied (Simpson 2000), and argued that often what is called participatory research is nothing more than "contracting people into projects which are entirely scientist-led, designed and managed" (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, page 1669).

What does this mean for community forestry? In the United States participatory research (PR) has arisen as a crucial element in community forestry, supporting and advancing the collaborative forest management processes that government agencies, community groups and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have developed all across the nation since the early 1990s. Yet, the practice of PR offers no guarantee that community forestry's goals of more meaningful participation, capacity building, and the

democratization of forest management will be met. Indeed, experience with PR suggests

that its central elements are not themselves sufficient to successfully advance these goals.

Many perils lie on the road to participatory research, and avoiding those perils lies more

in the approach than in the method. In making this point, I will first explain what I mean

by participatory research. I will then discuss three central elements of PR – research

processes, power sharing, and the production of knowledge – and how they bear on

achieving community forestry's broad goals.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

While there are many varieties of PR and many definitions, most definitions share

at least three common elements. First, they all indicate that PR actively involves the

"subjects" of the research in the research process itself. Second, they all emphasize

social change. PR is directed at effecting change that improves the lives of the people

engaged in the research. PR is thus typically concerned with power relations. I will

discuss this in more detail later. Third, they all directly or indirectly refer to the

production of knowledge through some formalized process.

Greenwood and Levin (1998, page 4), for example, define action research (AR) as

"social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and

members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. AR

promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a

more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders." Writing in the field of public

health, Wallerstein and Duran (2003, page 28) similarly observe that "like participatory

action research and action research, [community-based participatory research] takes the

perspective that 'participatory' research involves three interconnected goals: research, action, and education. As part of collaborative democratic processes, shared principles include a negotiation of information and capacities in both directions: researchers transferring tools for community members to analyze conditions and make informed decisions on actions to improve their lives, and community members transferring their expert content and meaning to researchers in the pursuit of mutual knowledge and application of the knowledge to their communities."

As these definitions indicate, PR entails involving the people directly affected by the phenomenon under study in the research process to produce new knowledge that can help them effect social change. Each of these areas – research processes, social change/power relations, and the production of knowledge – offer many challenges in pursuing this goal. I will discuss each in turn.

RESEARCH PROCESSES

The focus on social change means that in PR the process of conducting the research is as important as the research findings. The goal in involving ordinary citizens in the research is threefold. First, ordinary citizens bring an experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under study to the research. This complements the knowledge scientists and professional researchers bring, and improves the findings by providing new data and analytical insights that the scientists and professional researchers might otherwise miss.

Second, involving people directly affected by or involved in the phenomenon under study in the research process improves the chances that the research will be relevant to local needs and realities. This is so particularly if community members are

involved in developing the research question. Anchoring the investigation in community interests and concerns is more likely to produce results relevant to community members than researching a question that is solely of interest to scientists.

Third, the research process in PR builds capacity among the research participants to engage more effectively with forest policy and management. Through involvement in every stage of the research, participants develop skills in developing researchable questions and in gathering and analyzing data. They also acquire intimate knowledge of the research process and findings. This enables them to make effective decisions about how to use the new knowledge generated by the research. The research process is thus intended to help enhance the capacity of community members to mediate their own conflicts, represent their interests in wider social and political arenas, manage the resource sustainably, participate as informed actors in markets, and build community assets with benefits from managing the resource (Menzies 2003) – in short, to contribute to the general goals of community forestry.

In emphasizing capacity building as a goal of the research process, PR differs significantly from conventional research. While the stages of research are the same -- research initiation, question development, information gathering, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of results -- PR practitioners strive to include community members in as many stages as possible.

A peril here lies in what constitutes participation. A common error is to assume that since the researcher is involved in the life of the community, especially when s/he is employing participant observation as a field research method, that community members are participating in the research. By the same token, researchers may argue that

community members are participating in the research because they devote time to being interviewed (Bryan 2002). Confusion arises because PR researchers use many of the same methods (interviews, sample surveys, participant observation, focus groups, etc.) as conventional researchers in addition to methods that are designed to be participatory (community mapping, future search conferences (Schafft and Greenwood 2002; Pretty 1995; Slocum et al. 1995)). While the former do involve community members in the research, in conventional research community members participate as research subjects only. In PR, the professional researcher involves community members not only as subjects, but also as co-researchers who help shape the research agenda, help define research questions, and help collect and analyze data. In short, the professional researcher acts as a facilitator of the research, providing advice and technical assistance.

The problem with conflating participation as subjects and participation as co-researchers is that when this occurs, the benefits of the research may not flow to the community. Although the research may be labeled participatory, the outcomes may be no different than the types of outcomes for which conventional research has be criticized: the benefits accrue largely to the researcher (in advancing his/her career, earning royalties on publications/inventions, etc.); indigenous or local knowledge may be appropriated from the community and used inappropriately and/or to earn profits for corporate entities with no ties to the community; the community is no better off than it was before the research and, in fact, may be worse off.

Here it becomes evident that PR is more of an approach than a method. Since, as I mentioned, PR and conventional researchers often use the same methods, the crucial difference lies in assuring that the research actually does benefit the community. In PR

there is a great deal of variation in the degree to which community members are involved in the research. In some projects they may be thoroughly involved in every stage of the research. In others they may be only engaged in question development and data analysis. In some cases, the community may opt not to be involved in the research at all (due, for example, to the difficulty workers often face in taking time off work to actively participate, or to any number of other reasons). No matter the extent to which, or at what stage, community members participate in the research, "the most important distinctions centre on how and by whom is the research question formulated and by and for whom are research findings used" (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, page 1668).

These distinctions means that developing the research question is often not the starting point of the PR process. Other steps such as building trust, identifying leadership, and community organizing are necessary prior to doing so. Since these require a great deal of time, patience, and skill, the process of doing PR is lengthier and not as clear-cut as conventional research.

This raises questions about the extent to which the professional researcher should engage in community organizing to develop the community's capacity to define its own research question, or take the lead in developing research questions. Park (1993) has argued that while community organizing is necessary, and while research questions should emanate from the community to the extent possible, at some point the professional researcher must take the lead in formulating a question. Maguire (1993) describes a situation that illustrates this point. Although she spent a year organizing a group of battered women to empower themselves and assist one another, the group never reached

the point of formulating a research question, and she had to address her doctoral dissertation to questions of her own.

This issue has arisen in community forestry in the United States. In 2003 a debate ensued in a community forestry NGO over the community organizing one of its regional centers was doing with Latino forest workers. While many in the NGO felt that the center was devoting too much time to organizing and not enough time to actually doing research and producing results, the center maintained that it was difficult to plan or do research until the forest workers themselves came up with a research question.

The debate is significant because it highlights a consequence of the traditional separation of research and community organizing: researchers are presently not trained in strategies for making the transition from community organizing to jointly developing research questions with disenfranchised communities. The essence of the debate within the NGO is a tension inherent within the process of jointly developing research questions. On one extreme, professional researchers develop the research question with token or minimal community input. This risks conducting research that at best is irrelevant to the community and at worst contributes to its further marginalization. On the other extreme, is a complete hands-off approach in which no question is considered legitimate unless it is developed solely by community members. This risks working indefinitely on community organizing since, depending on the circumstances, some communities may never reach the point at which they are comfortable defining a research question. Clearly, what is best in each situation will lie somewhere between these two extremes. At present, however, tools and strategies for addressing this issue are not well developed, and there is little institutional support for making such determinations.

POWER SHARING

PR's concern with capacity building, of which co-developing research questions is a crucial part, is directly connected to its goal of effecting social change. As I mentioned earlier, effecting social change often, but not always, entails creating more equitable relations of power. At a minimum, PR practitioners are concerned with equalizing the relations of power between the professional researcher and the members of the community or organization being studied. It should be clear by now that this entails involving the community or organization members as equal partners in the research process. Often, however, the goal of effecting social change means taking further steps to create more equitable relationships of power within communities or between communities and external entities such as government agencies, corporations, or NGOs operating on a regional or national level. Achieving this result is challenging, however, because people in positions of power are often reluctant to relinquish their authority, and because PR methods themselves do not assure that community members will control the research process or the application and dissemination of results.

Indeed, PR may be, and participatory processes in general often are, employed as a means of achieving predetermined ends. In community development, for example, participation has been touted as a means of alleviating poverty and more efficiently achieving the goals of urban redevelopment programs for several decades. In the 1960s, however, planners began to notice that the rhetoric did not always match actual practice. In 1969 Sherry Arnstein published a typology consisting of eight levels of participation from manipulation, in which citizens serve on rubberstamp committees and boards at the

behest of power holders, to citizen control, in which ordinary citizens themselves govern a program or institution and have the power to negotiate interventions by external interests. At the less participatory levels, power holders may see participation merely as a means of gathering information, as a means of gaining citizen support for a project with predetermined goals, as a way to educate people about the benefits of a project, or otherwise as a means of achieving project goals while conceding little, if any, power to citizen groups. At the more participatory levels, people enjoy a more active, meaningful role in planning and implementing projects, and/or in gathering and analyzing information (Arnstein 1969).

These varying levels of participation are evident in PR as well. As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995, page 1668) observe, frequently the difference between conventional and participatory modes of research may be more of degree than of kind. In practice there is often a "zig-zag pathway" between the two approaches with greater or less participation occurring at different stages of the research rather than strict adherence to participatory processes throughout the project. Indeed, there is a continuum of participation with community partners engaged minimally at one extreme and full engagement in every aspect of the research at the other. Most PR projects fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

Regardless of the degree of participation, there is a risk that PR will be, and indeed it has been, used to produce information needed for implementing projects that do not benefit the non-scientists participating in the research. Simpson (2000), for example, argues that the recent popularity of using participatory methods in the study of indigenous technical knowledge among First Nations people in Canada is not

empowering for them. She points out that there are only certain kinds of indigenous knowledge that non-Native researchers are interested in: knowledge about the environment. Moreover, she argues that non-Native researchers typically apply that knowledge to solving their own problems, or to solving more general problems in ways that they think they should be solved. Despite promises to the contrary, First Nations people are treated as providers of information and are not accorded power or authority to determine how that information is used.

In and of themselves, PR methods offer no assurance that such perils will be avoided. Again the overall approach is more important than the method. The critical aspect of this approach is assuring that the co-researchers are satisfied with their level of participation and that they are receiving, or will receive, the benefits they expect and want from the research.

This is a significant challenge. In addition to the difficulties I have been describing, a major obstacle is the ability of researchers and the people with whom they conduct research to include representation of all interests in the research. Often institutional structures, barriers of race, class, and gender, and limitations in the social networks of the participants in the research circumscribe who is involved in the research. Moreover, communities may fall back on established relations of power and institutional structures when implementing the research findings (Schafft and Greenwood 2002).

THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

This question of equity, of who benefits from the research, cuts to the very core of scientific practice. The explicit attempts of PR projects to effect social change opens

them to the criticism that their findings will be biased. The incorporation of local or indigenous knowledge on equal terms with scientific knowledge also opens PR to charges of producing biased results. Although PR practitioners, like all researchers, need to be concerned with bias, there is no reason to assume that PR's focus on social change or incorporation of local knowledge introduces any more risk of bias than there is in conventional research. Both PR and conventional research run the risk of being biased. That risk is different for each, however, because of the different epistemologies underlying them and because of the different approaches to power relations they each take.

The Old and the New Scientific Epistemologies

PR requires a new way of viewing knowledge and how science produces it. Traditionally, scientists have assumed that there is a reality, independent of human thought, about which scientists, through rigor of method, can uncover the truth. Conventional science rests on the assumption that only trained scientists can produce legitimate findings with a high degree of certainty that they accurately portray this independent reality.

A new view of the relationship between knowledge and science has emerged in the past few decades, however. Proponents of this new view also assume that there is a reality that is independent of human thought, but qualify this assumption with the notion that our knowledge of that independent reality is always filtered through cultural lenses. This qualification permits a recognition that there are many different ways of knowing the world, and that these ways are really collective social judgements (Greenwood and

Levin 1998) about the situation under study. The knowledge science produces itself

consists of collective social judgements about the phenomenon under study, and science

thus is just one way among many of viewing and understanding the world.

This is not the same as saying that all perspectives are equally valid or all

information is equally flawed. Rather, it is simply to say that science is a highly social

activity. Typically scientists consult with one another and interact frequently, often

intensively, in conducting research. In other words, in conducting research, scientists get

together, gather information, analyze it, and decide together what it means. The

assumptions scientists bring to problems, how they define what the problem is, and the

way they go about gathering information all influence the knowledge that is produced.

Involving people directly affected by the phenomenon under study in research changes

this dynamic. It brings in new information and new perspectives which can enrich the

data and deepen the analysis because this knowledge is derived from direct experience

with the phenomenon.

This is a key element of PR. PR practitioners recognize that knowledge lies in

action. People have direct knowledge about the activities they engage in on a daily basis,

as well as about the environments in which they engage in those activities. This

knowledge, gained through intimate daily experience, guides people in their engagement

with the world and the things in it, and people, in turn, modify that knowledge based on

the outcomes of their actions. This "knowledge-in-action" is an integral part of the

functioning of real world phenomena, and the people who know it best are the people

who engage directly with the phenomenon under study either through work or play or

both. Thus, to omit that knowledge from research, is to exclude a key aspect of the functioning of real-world phenomena (Schon 1995).

Incorporating this knowledge into research does risk introducing bias into the research findings. In all research, the agenda's, interests, assumptions, and worldviews of the researchers steer the research in some directions and not others. They also encourage the researchers to focus on certain data and not others. This is true in PR every bit as much as it is in conventional research. The difference between PR and conventional science lies in the sources of bias. Involving ordinary citizens in the research, and incorporating their knowledge of the situation under study, introduces a different set of goals, assumptions, and ways of defining the problem. PR practitioners are cognizant of this, and just as conventional researchers do, employ a number of tools and techniques for preventing, evaluating, and minimizing the effects of bias in the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Pretty 1995).

The Concern for Power Relations

PR is also criticized as producing biased results because of its general goal of effecting social change and the attendant concern PR practitioners have for power relations. While this goal and this concern do risk the introduction of bias, again the difference between PR and conventional research is not so much that one is biased and the other is not, but rather that the sources of bias are different. The emphases in PR on social change and power relations orients the research to solving problems rather than conducting research simply for the sake of advancing knowledge – the purported goal of basic scientific research.

In conventional research, prevailing power relations are often taken for granted, and the impact they may have on the research goes unexamined. This itself is a source of bias. The production of knowledge is always value laden, and conventional research serves the needs of those in power simply because they are better positioned economically, politically, and socially to determine what questions are asked as well as to utilize the findings of research. In seeking to challenge those power relations (which PR practitioners often, but not always, do), and to alter them so that less powerful people gain a greater degree of control over their own destinies than they previously had, PR risks biasing its findings in ways that favor different people than the findings of conventional research. Again, the need to guard against bias and evaluate its effects is apparent, and PR practitioners have developed procedures for doing so.

A Return to the Approach

Whether adopting a conventional or a participatory approach to research, one will face questions about how to assure that the information one is gathering is accurate. PR practitioners utilize several tools and techniques for doing so, including several that are commonly used in conventional research: triangulation, peer or colleague checking, parallel and repeated investigations, and several others. PR also commonly includes additional measures such as having the participants in the research check the findings, inquiry audits (providing enough information about the process and product to enable a disinterested party to determine whether the findings are not sheer fantasy), and assessing how useful the findings were to the participants and what changes resulted from the research (Pretty 1995).

This last evaluative tool – assessing the usefulness of the findings and the changes the research produced – highlights, once again, the point that PR is more of an approach than a method. PR's epistemology is insufficient in itself to assure that meaningful participation takes place, or that social change is realized. Even accepting that people have valid knowledge about the activities they engage in regularly as well as about the environments in which they engage in those activities, does not assure that the broad goals of PR will be met. As I mentioned earlier, even when indigenous or local knowledge is recognized as having value, PR projects may result in the appropriation of that knowledge for purposes over which the originators of that knowledge have no control, or that primarily benefit people outside of their community.

Another challenge is determining what the community is. While PR's emphasis on effecting social change to bring about a more satisfying situation for the community or organization with whom the research is being conducted is an essential ingredient in the approach, determining who is included in the research is often not easily accomplished. "Community" is one of the most elusive social science concepts (Murphree 2000, page 4), and attempts to define it for forest management purposes have often led to unrealistic and unworkable definitions (Machlis and Force 1988). People with divergent interests and perspectives reside within geographically bounded spaces, and people who reside outside those spaces, often at considerable distance, may have interests within them.

This has led to a distinction being made between communities of place and communities of interest (Gray, Enzer, and Kusel 2001). The latter are defined as interest groups, such as national environmental organizations or itinerant forest workers, who reside outside of the geographic space that defines the community of place. This

distinction itself is problematic, however, since the specific interests groups of people within geographic communities have in adjacent forest lands may unite them more as a community of interest than as a community of place. Moreover, communities of interest outside of geographic communities may have close ties to those communities (partial year residency; employment in the forest with residence elsewhere; friends, relatives, or colleagues who live in those forested places) and therefore may develop some of the attachments to place that are commonly associated exclusively with communities of place (London 2001).

This heterogeneity of communities immediately presents students/researchers with a problem. Which group in the community are they going to involve in their research? Picking one group may be seen as choosing sides. Yet, trying to involve people from the broad spectrum of groups and interests in the community may be impossible if antagonisms are high.

The major disadvantage of having to choose to conduct research jointly with one particular group, however, lies in efforts to minimize the effects of bias on the research. Ideally, all factions in the community would inform the research in some way. Yet, whether one takes a conventional or participatory approach to research, perceptions about the researcher(s), their motives and objectives, always color the information that is gathered. Moreover, if the researchers work more closely with one particular group, will they miss information that other community members might provide? For whom will the research be relevant? As in all research, a participatory approach requires careful attention to the sources of information and the way in which it is gathered to assure that the best possible information is collected. PR requires close attention to an additional

matter, however: the question of who benefits. This is necessary to avoid the kinds of inequities that have often resulted from conventional research, *and* to avoid benefiting some members of the community at the expense of others.

CONCLUSION

PR's self-reflexive quality – its continuous questioning of the nature of the participation and who stands to benefit from the outcomes of the research – is the major point of distinction between it and conventional research. It is through this quality that PR holds promise for "democratizing" knowledge in a way that helps to achieve community forestry's broad goal of building community capacity for more meaningful participation in forest land use and management. Yet, in and of itself, PR offers no assurances that this will occur. As I have tried to show, there are many challenges in conducting PR, not the least of which is assuring that participation is truly meaningful. The key to overcoming this challenge lies in the approach, not the method. This approach requires attention to power relations, the epistemology underpinning the research, and the research process itself. But above all, it requires a firm commitment to using the research process to enhance the ability of people affected by the phenomenon under study to use the research results to improve their own situation in ways that they choose.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carl Wilmsen is an associate specialist in community forestry at the University of
California, Berkeley. He is the coordinator of the Community Forestry Research
Fellowship Program.

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