



Cast Off the Shackles of Academia! Use Participatory Approaches to Tackle Real-World Problems With Underserved Populations

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On the Ground

- When scientists or change agents engage other cultures to problem-solve, there is a high risk of miscommunication and project failure.
- This process can be further crippled by traditionally rigid, top-down academic approaches that focus investigators on predefined issues lacking relevance to the top-priority concerns of local communities.
- Participatory, adaptive methods of public engagement, in contrast, are now being increasingly used in such situations. They help researchers work more effectively by building more authentic partnerships with stakeholders so that real problems and sustainable solutions can be identified.
- Such methods can also promote insightful, interdisciplinary science and more effective public service.

Keywords: participatory rural appraisal, participatory action research, community-based natural resource management, innovation systems, social-ecological systems, engaged scholarship.

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In our careers as applied scientists we aspire to solve big problems in the real world. We conduct carefully designed studies, publish papers in well-regarded journals, and train talented graduate students along the way. Then we “cross our fingers” and hope that the published work catches the attention of people who will translate the findings into a new technology or management

practice, push for implementation, and move humanity forward. Or maybe not...?

Perhaps like many other range scientists who began their careers in the 1970s and 1980s, I began by working in the context of descriptive field studies. These studies focused on matters such as plant-herbivore interactions, livestock feeding behavior, diet selection, and productivity. I conducted a few experiments concerning ruminant nutrition and responses of grasses to simulated grazing. Subsequently, I have focused more on the human dimensions of rangelands, using descriptive information derived from social science methods. My work has been conducted both in the western United States and overseas.

In most of these cases, my research was fairly conventional, that is, academic in orientation and distant from “real-world problem solving.” But to be fair, the funding supporting my studies was either targeted at the generation of basic knowledge, or if it was intended to generate knowledge for application, there were no mechanisms in place to allow application to happen very easily.

My Epiphany: The Disconnect Between Applied Research and Local Problem Solving

In the late 1980s, I was traveling in northern Nigeria with a colleague, and we were visiting some well-publicized research projects that were purportedly on the cusp of solving some really big problems of local producers of cattle and goats. Then I happened to ride with a talkative taxi driver, who told me that what the locals really wanted were systems to produce pigs more efficiently because that was where the money was. For the first time, I realized that the agenda of the researchers could be markedly different from that of producers; the propaganda flowed freely from the research machine, and stakeholder input was not considered in the process of problem identification. This was paradoxical, given that the mandate for these research teams in Nigeria was to solve animal production problems and reduce poverty. The research, indeed, resulted in many written outputs, but there was little hope of impact on the communities. The system, in this case, was broken.

In this article, I first describe how and why participatory research has emerged to address the “disconnect problem” described above. By “participatory research,” I refer to methods whereby stakeholders—typically resource users—provide input that fundamentally helps shape research priorities and approaches. I then discuss some pros and cons of participatory versus conventional research in the context of local problem solving. I conclude by providing my assessment as to why I feel it is now time for participatory research to gain momentum and be adopted by mainstream rangeland professionals who desire to see real-world impacts emanate from their work.

The Advent of Participatory Approaches

Starting in the 1970s, efforts were made to better connect applied research with producer problems in the developing world. In some respects, this was a fringe movement that sought to fill a gap created by the lack of Extension capability. One early example of such approaches was “Farming Systems Research,” where researchers engaged farmers in an iterative process of constraint identification and alleviation.¹ Despite the inherent logic and value of this methodology, it never really became mainstream.

Perhaps the boldest critiques of the ineffectiveness of conventional rural development tactics have been made by Robert Chambers, starting in the early 1980s.^{2,3} Chambers illuminated many of the disconnects between the world of “development experts” and the needs of the rural poor. His impassioned pleas for professionals in power to discount their top-down approaches in favor of putting a higher value on the wisdom and capabilities of rural people have inspired a generation of scholars and practitioners in the international development arena.

Chambers and others also pioneered the use of innovative field methods, such as *participatory rural appraisal* (PRA). The philosophy of PRA is epitomized when development experts form authentic, power-sharing, problem-solving partnerships with rural communities.⁴ The main focus of PRA is to identify the key, solvable problems in a community and then devise a *community action plan* (CAP). The CAP lays out the pathway for change and identifies the human, technical, and financial resources needed to move forward. In the past decade, PRA has moved from the domain of informal field manuals to that of scholarly texts.⁵

Although the PRA approach has been adapted to fit a variety of circumstances, the core toolkit involves about a dozen elements. These underpin a process of in-depth community engagement and information generation. This includes the use of group meetings, personal interviews, and independent observations (Table 1).

A PRA can be conducted in an unrestricted format or a restricted (sectoral) format. An unrestricted format can reveal community problems from almost any realm that can be publicly discussed, whereas a restricted format could focus on specific issues related to agriculture, natural resource management, water, public education, gender, and so on.

Although the unrestricted format has the disadvantage of having less predictable outcomes, it can be very useful because a much wider assortment of problems is ranked and discussed. This makes it clearer, for example, how natural resource problems might compare with social problems in a ranked list of community priorities. This can reveal why some problems receive enthusiastic community response and others less so. Skilled practitioners can “connect the dots” of seemingly disparate problems and solutions from an unrestricted PRA into a unified approach for problem solving.

The initial diagnostic phase of a PRA can take a week or more of concentrated effort. The PRA process is especially valuable for “experts” who have been tasked with making recommendations as to how the livelihoods of people in an underserved community might be improved. The irony, of course, is that the experts are often navigating a system foreign to them, and they are therefore likely to make erroneous recommendations.^{2,3}

Another movement involving participatory approaches began in the United States during the 1980s. This was in response to a need for problem solving in a number of sectors, including public education and private industry. Action research (also referred to as *participatory action research* [PAR]) is another process whereby researchers or external change agents work closely with project beneficiaries.⁷ The PAR approach involves a series of iterative steps shown in Fig. 1. Some of the voices advocating for the increased use of PAR have been “radical sociologists” seeking new frontiers for academic social science.⁸ As will be discussed, PRA can be combined with PAR because they are complementary. A PRA provides a problem diagnosis, whereas a PAR can provide the research details (often via conventional means) that support the creation of new technology, management systems, or policy interventions needed to solve the problem.

It is notable that there have been some updates in the terminology for PRA, as well as subtle changes in methods to better incorporate themes such as sustainability or women’s empowerment. A more recent area of inquiry related to PRA or PAR is called “innovation systems.” Innovation systems, as applied to rural development, is European in origin and expands the scope for multi-stakeholder engagement over larger organizational, temporal, and spatial scales.⁹ In addition, broader recognition of the importance of the “engaged university” in bridging gaps between applied research and societal problem solving also speaks to the need for more effective participatory processes.¹⁰

My First Exposure to Participatory Approaches

My research approaches—previously described here—fundamentally changed nearly 15 years ago when I was introduced to PRA and PAR in the context of a project in East Africa. The main goal of the Pastoral Risk Management (also known as PARIMA) project—which operated in Ethiopia and Kenya from 1997 to 2009—was to find ways that pastoralists could better manage the risks imposed on their livestock-based livelihoods by drought, economics, or social conflict. Avenues for improving risk

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