



Can we find solutions with people? Participatory action research with small organic producers in Andalusia

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This paper reports on an experiment linking science with people. Taking as a paradigm the holistic scientific approach fostered by agroecology, we present a methodological proposal for the implementation of participatory action research in rural areas. Our aims were various: to solve a specific problem, i.e. the exclusion of small- and medium-scale organic farmers from the official certification system; to find solutions collectively through an exchange of knowledge between researchers, technicians, producers and consumers; and to generate endogenous social change in rural areas through processes based on local skills and collective creativity. This paper examines the methods applied, and provides a participatory reflexive analysis of those methods. Both the keys to the success and the constraints are analysed, in order to conclude the contributions that agroecology and PAR processes can make to sustainable and innovative research proposals.

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1. The critique of participation: who is speaking?

Since the 1980s, it has generally been agreed – particularly in research areas such as endogenous development and rural change – that social knowledge cannot be understood without (re) thinking the question of power (Escobar, 1995; Rist et al., 2007). Power is broadly understood as the legitimization, by symbolic and coercive means, of a “political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth”(Foucault, 1980: 133). This view is particularly relevant for those involved in rural development, who see knowledge as a relationship rather than as a commodity to be delivered “top-down”, in the manner long adopted by functionalist approaches to development (cf. Rogers, 1962; Long and Villarreal 1994: 49). Therefore, and especially in contemporary societies, it is essential to know “who is speaking”, in Foucault’s terms, in order to understand the distribution of power in any social relationship. Within this critical view of knowledge as an expression of power, we can trace at least three general approaches that have influenced current debate regarding the application of participatory action research to rural social change, and have shaped the socio-methodological framework of *Agroecology* employed here:

1. the critique of conventional development arising from *post-colonial studies* and the notion of *endogenous development*, that gained currency during the 1990s
2. the *popular education* theories advanced in the 1970s by Latin-American educators such as Freire and Fals Borda
3. the work of the so-called *critical sociologists*, including the French researchers Edgar Morin and Bruno Latour, which from the 1970s onwards uncovered the ethical, logical and political biases of modern western science.

In the field of endogenous development, a number of authors (e.g. Escobar, 1995; see Sachs, 1992) have highlighted the arbitrary nature of development discourse, which shapes the way we think about poverty in terms of the objects to be studied (e.g. the poor, the need for capital accumulation), the concepts to be used (e.g. underdeveloped, sustainable), the theoretical underpinning (e.g. modernization, dependency) and the subjective outlook (e.g. underdeveloped communities are passive, ignorant, powerless). Western institutions, ranging from governments to multilateral agencies (UN, WB), constitute the kernel of the power system behind the ‘regime of truth’ in development, a system interested in preserving and profiting from the existing political and economic status quo. To avoid this, ‘radical’ participatory systems and flexible projects based on process approaches must be part of the new social development paradigm (Chambers, 1997).

It should be stressed that this critique found support in the development domain by incorporating arguments grounded on

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environmental sustainability. A particularly significant contribution to the emergence of agroecology was the concept of “co-evolution” coined by *Norgaard (1993)*: we live in a eco-social system in which nature and sociotechnical institutions mutually govern and shape each other, through interactions embedded in environmental processes. Recognition of the failure of development and the need for sustainable approaches constitute the internationally-acknowledged twin pillars of agroecology (see *Gliessman, 2008; Sevilla, 2006; Sevilla-Guzmán and Woodgate, 1997*).

The second critique argues that there is no such thing as neutrality when we are dealing with processes involving learning and education (*Freire 1970; Fals Borda et al., 1972*). Therefore, participation should be oriented towards the ‘practice of freedom’, with a view to facilitating the transformation of everyday life for those involved, who are excluded from material benefits and from epistemological production. Here, methodological aspects play an essential role in uncovering vested interests, and pave the way for the emergence of new and creative “solutions” to practical problems.

These approaches encouraged and inspired a community-based participatory approach to action-oriented research all over the world, evidence of which can be traced in the work of the Indian participatory research advocate *Rajesh Tandon (2000)*, the American researchers *Hall, Brydon-Miller and Park (Park et al., 1993)*, and finally the Spanish scholar *Tomás R. Villasante (Villasante et al., 2000)*, whose work provides the basis for the present application of participatory research action to the field of agroecology.

Last but not least, critical sociology – more closely tied to Western discourse about the “validity” of normal science – has exposed and explored the ways in which scientific knowledge is embedded in logical and political games, rendering impossible any useful democratic and communicative action, to use *Habermas’ (1984)* terms. The systemic approaches (social, economic, physical) adopted by Western science rely heavily on a biased simplification of the relationships between the “whole” and its “parts”; these approaches, despite their frequently erroneous outcomes, claim to be founts of “legitimacy” and “truth” (*Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993*). Instead, the critical sociologists argue that we should go for complex views that assume “uncertainties”, “contradictions” and “emergent properties” arising from the parts (or actors) involved in a system (*Morin 1992*). Therefore, in the socio-economic setting we should reject the authoritarian recipes imposed by “laboratory science” (*Latour 1979*). This traditional and

ultimately futile concept of science should be replaced by a participatory paradigm according to which, since information is context-dependent, the production of knowledge should make room for people (*Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993*).

These critiques of the science and power systems underlying conventional development were widely shared by advocates of participatory rural approaches in the 1990s, who conceived knowledge as “an encounter of horizons” (*Long and Villarreal 1994: 42*) and learning as “an adaptive and iterative process” (*Pretty and Chambers, 1994: 185*). Instead of promoting a managed intervention pursuing a “common goal”, endogenous development comprises a series of learning processes induced by facilitators, aimed at negotiating with a range of distinct interests, goals, power and access to resources (see *Scoones and Thompson 1994: 22*).

Building upon these practices and arguments, the agroecological approach emerged in the late 1980s. Methodologically, it sought to go beyond rapid appraisals and to support participatory action research aimed ultimately at achieving self-mobilization processes within a given community (*Sevilla, 2006: 125*). The essential focus was to be both environmental and cultural, stressing the need to go for a “hard sustainability”, as opposed to the “soft views” expressed by environmental economists (*Sevilla-Guzmán and Woodgate, 1997*). To clarify the approaches underlying agroecology, the table below, drawing upon *Pretty’s (1995)* work, summarizes the various types of participation (*Table 1*).

The participatory approaches adopted by agroecology belong to types six, seven and eight. Type six, interactive participation, is appropriate for groups or territories with less experience of social organization, and thus less group cohesion amongst local inhabitants. In these contexts, collective processes are unlikely to develop spontaneously, so an initial boost is required. Types seven and eight, supported participation and self-mobilization, can be used wherever there is a more mature level of social cohesion. Here, agroecology as a scientific approach plays a supportive role. Under these three approaches society ceases to be an object for study, and becomes an arena for the work of active agents (*Villasante, 2002*). In these cases, the research team not only promotes, supports and enhances initiatives by providing suitable tools and instruments, but also focuses on defending the initiatives and advocating their inclusion in existing legal frameworks and government policies.

The two major defects inherent in the first four types of participation (manipulated, passive, through consultation or through material incentives) are that they establish unequal

Table 1
Types of participation.

Types of participation	Features
1. Manipulated Participation	Facilitates the presence of unelected pseudo-representatives of the “beneficiaries” in an official space. These representatives have no real power
2. Passive Participation	Project managers or researchers inform people about what has been decided or what is being done
3. Participation through consultation	Participation is facilitated through consultation, usually in the form of responses to certain questions. The problems and the method of obtaining information are externally-defined; as a result, data analysis, too, is carried out externally.
4. Participation through material incentives	Participation is reward-driven. Both research and process design are external.
5. Functional participation	People are brought into the work done towards achieving certain predetermined targets. They work in groups, and a certain degree of interaction is generated that may guide some decisions. This usually happens once structural decisions have already been taken.
6. Interactive Participation	Joint participation in analysis and process development. Participation is conceived as a right, rather than as a means of achieving certain objectives. This approach facilitates systematic and structured learning processes
7. Supported Participation	People work together, supported by external teams who respect their collective dynamics of social action and, at the request of the participants, overcome certain weaknesses in collective learning processes. Decisions are the responsibility of the participants
8. Self-mobilization	People participate regardless of any external inputs. External services can be used to identify issues, provide funding or give practical advice, etc. but participants retain control of the process and the resources.

Source: *Caporal, F., (1998: 452)*.

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