What Is Participatory Research, And Why Does It Matter?

National Community Forestry Center
Northern Forest Region
June, 2001
The National Community Forestry Center (NCFC) is a decentralized network with four regional centers and a national coordinator. The four regional centers are located in the Southwest, the Appalachians, the Pacific Northwest, and the Northeast. The Northern Forest Regional Center of the NCFC is administered by Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. of St. Albans, Vermont. The northern forest region, our primary area of service, comprises the states of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

The core purpose of the Northern Forest Regional Center is to help rural people conduct and use research to inform decision-making about forest resources. Our goal is to add value to the work of communities, organizations, and institutions in our region who share a vision of healthy communities and healthy forests, now and for future generations.

The work of the Center includes:
• developing partnerships with existing organizations who share our vision
• assisting rural communities in defining research agendas and engaging scientists in participatory research
• conducting targeted research to address region-wide issues and opportunities
• responding to requests by rural people for information and technical assistance related to community forestry
• establishing mechanisms such as listservs, web page, newsletter, and conferences to facilitate information sharing and networking
• publishing fact sheets, reports, and other materials on forest-related topics
• working intensively with up to three communities per year based on priorities established by our Advisory Council.

We look forward to engaging you in this unique opportunity to support rural people in creating healthy communities and healthy forests. We would be happy to respond to your inquiries about the Center’s services, or about specific forest topics, and are prepared to assist you in locating forest-related information and resources.

The National Community Forestry Center is a program of the National Network of Forest Practitioners. Network members share an interest in rural community development based upon sustainable forestry, and, even more importantly, a conviction that healthy communities and healthy ecosystems are interdependent.
Questions for the Reader

• What do you want to know about the forests in and around your community or about the ways in which the people who live in and visit your community use and relate to the forests?

• Do you need help to find out?

• Are there people in your community who would be willing to get involved in finding out? Don’t forget young people! They can be a terrific source of research assistance.

• Do you know any researchers who would be willing and able to work with you in a participatory framework?

• We’re here to help. If you have a participatory research project in mind and would like assistance in the form of training, connections to researchers, or technical assistance, please let us know.
The National Community Forestry Center came into being to enable people who live in forested communities in the United States to derive greater environmental, economic, and social benefits from the forest resource. Our core purpose is to help rural people conduct and use research to make informed decisions about forest resources. The method of research we support most strongly is participatory research. The Center’s goals illustrate the philosophy behind our work, and our support for participatory, community-based research.

Center Goals

Develop mechanisms to integrate local knowledge, experience, and participation in efforts to enhance and protect the natural resource base on which forest economies depend

Develop processes that engage researchers and rural communities in identifying research needs that will contribute to the growth of locally-based economic opportunities and forest conservation

Increase the capacity of rural communities to use and produce information that will contribute to the development of new and higher value products from forest resources while enhancing and conserving the forests themselves

Assure that research institutions and governmental agencies receive information contributed by rural residents

Make science more accessible to rural people in forested areas
Participatory research differs from conventional research in a number of important ways:

• In participatory research, community members identify the research questions. In conventional research, an expert researcher identifies the questions.

• In participatory research, community members carry out research activities, and learn the skills and techniques required to do so. In conventional research, expert researchers do the researching.

• In participatory research, a wide variety of research methods may be used flexibly and in combination, whereas conventional research is typically restricted to a single approach rigidly applied.

• In participatory research, community members learn to analyze information they have collected and decide how to use this information in action. Communities own the results of the research process. In conventional research, researchers own the results of the research process and are typically more interested in knowledge for its own sake than in using what they have learned to help communities reach their goals.

In practice, most research occurs along a continuum between participatory and conventional research methods as illustrated by the diagram below. As research becomes increasingly participatory, the role of the expert researcher changes. In the most conventional approach, the professional researcher initiates and owns the process. In a more participatory approach the researcher may act as a consultant to those desiring information. Finally, the researcher may become a facilitator to assist others in designing, carrying out, and analyzing the results of the research. Community participants change roles as well from being the objects of study to advising and contributing, and finally, to ownership and control of the research process and results.
Participatory research is a tree with many branches. Some of the branches are called participatory action research, participatory learning and action, farming systems research, rapid rural appraisal, participatory impact monitoring, and cooperative inquiry. All share a commitment to involving ordinary people in the process of discovery that is research and using the results of the process to make positive change in peoples’ lives.

“What is Participatory Research and Why Does It Matter?” is a companion piece to our first publication, “What is Community Forestry and Why Does It Matter?” The six readings have been chosen to provide some approaches to and examples of participatory research as used in the United States and Canada.

The first article, “What Is Participatory Action Research?” is the introductory chapter to a publication called Research for Change, Participatory Action Research for Community Groups written by Jan Barnsley and Diana Ellis of The Women’s Research Center in Vancouver, British Columbia. It’s a down-to-earth description of participatory action research—what it is, how it works, and what its basic principles are.

The second article, “Participatory Research, Democracy, and Community” by Peter Park provides a concise description of some of the theoretical issues inherent in participatory research. Article number three, “Town & Gown: Making Research Serve Communities’ Needs” by Miriam Axel-Lute describes a variety of working relationships between academic institutions, individual researchers, and communities.

“Citizens as Experts” by Nick Kotz illustrates the difference citizen involvement can make in the way government programs are carried out at the local level. “Students Map Resources of Robeson County, NC” gives a compelling example of participatory research as a learning experience for young people as well as a tool for revitalization. “Grassroots Participatory Research: A Working Report from a Gathering of Practitioners” convened by Lee Williams and the Community Partnership Center of the University of Tennessee in 1997, provides insights into why some people choose to do participatory research in the first place.

We have included a glossary of terms beginning on page 61. We encourage you to use the glossary in the traditional way, as a reference to look up words that are unfamiliar to you. In addition, we invite you to use the glossary to reflect upon the way words such as fact, truth, and objectivity are used to validate or invalidate information and/or certain ways of knowing.
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What Is Participatory Action Research?

This guide presents a way for community groups to do research that will help to improve the situation of people in the community.

There are many ways to do research. There are lots of good reasons for doing it. But we are focusing specifically on research for change.

Research is the systematic collection and analysis of information. We define action research as the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change.

Our approach to action research emphasizes participation. Some people make distinctions between “action research” and “participatory research.” We blend the two: our approach is participatory action research. We emphasize both research for the purpose of making change and community participation in the process. However, we usually call our approach “action research” because it’s a simpler term.

We see research as part of an ongoing process for change. It’s an aid to action, and a tool for empowerment, not an end in itself. That’s why we talk about the research process rather than research projects.

Action research is a way of getting the information we need as community activists to develop effective strategies. It uses qualitative methods which provide descriptions of situations and communities. The focus is on learning about how people actually experience the specific issue or problem. This knowledge is the key to knowing what actions will make a practical difference to people’s lives and why.

Research isn’t always necessary. Sometimes we know the issue. We know what will make a difference to the people affected by it. But if we need to check, if we have questions, then research may be a useful tool.
Research isn’t magic. Research findings are meant to be applied. No matter how persuasive a piece of research is, it can’t change anything unless it’s acted on and used. We can use the insights we gain in many aspects of our work - from developing a service to doing advocacy.

Some of the most effective action research projects were never written up in a report. For example, one Indo-Canadian women’s group used what they learned as the basis for a play to raise awareness about wife assault in their community. Some groups have made videos to show people what’s really going on in the community. Others have used what they learned to organize meetings to influence decision-makers or to reach out to others in the community.

The action in action-research can happen throughout the process, not just at the end.

The key thing that action research makes possible is the development of strategies and programs based on real life experience rather than theories or assumptions.

Action research is also meant to strengthen and mobilize the group that does it. One way it does this is by increasing the understanding of the issues it’s working on. The research provides a chance to test assumptions and to be surer of the ground we stand on.

It’s also an opportunity for community members to work collectively and strengthen their connections with each other. The process of participating can build skills, confidence, and knowledge.

And going out into the community to do research may introduce us to people who could become new members or supporters. It can be a good way of raising awareness about our group and our issue in the larger community. It may also show us where obstacles exist and gives us ideas about how to overcome them.

We can also take what we learn from doing action research into future actions and organizing in the community.

Our Research Approach

This method is designed especially for community groups. Our focus is grassroots community groups because they provide a way for people to express their concerns. By “community” we mean either geographic community or a community of interest - that is, people with similar experience or shared problems.
All kinds of discrimination are fought, first and foremost, by the people who are discriminated against. Effective public policy and programs depend on strong advocacy and input from people with first-hand experience of the issues. Community-based organizations have historically initiated the collective action that is necessary to improve the conditions of people’s lives.

In the feminist movement, local women’s centres and consciousness-raising groups provided the initial forum for women to speak about their experience. By listening respectfully to women’s stories, feminists learned what the issues were and got ideas about what actions to take. From this base, they organized services and advocacy on a wide range of issues. Grassroots women’s groups, such as women’s centres, rape crisis centres, and transition houses, continue to be the cornerstone of the movement. They are the places where new issues emerge and strategies can be developed.

Community-based AIDS groups have given a voice to people living with AIDS and HIV. They have challenged society’s assumptions about who gets HIV/AIDS and what it’s like to live with it. They have also played a key role in insisting that society recognize the need for education and support services.

It has been self-help groups for seniors and for people with disabilities who have revealed new possibilities for themselves and their caregivers, as well as for health care professionals and policy makers.

First Nations people and people of colour have worked, from the ground up, for their basic human rights. One example is the way that First Nations are organizing to end the violence in their communities through reviving Aboriginal traditions and spirituality.

Community groups play an essential role in providing the means for people to act in their own best interests. Action research can help community groups to be grounded and strong in that work.

Community ownership and control are essential for community participation. In our approach, the people who experience the problem, or who are members of the community, have ownership of the process. Their experience is invaluable. They know how to involve other members of the community in the research process. They have insights into how to ask questions of people in that community. And their perspective helps in understanding the answers.
When community members have ownership of the research process, there’s a better chance the research will be relevant to them. If it’s relevant to them, they’ll likely be more willing and able to act on it.

In our approach, community participants define the research questions and control the research process. They are involved in figuring out what the research process will be. They make the decisions.

People from the community also collect and analyze the research information themselves or they help to do it. Researchers from outside the community may be called in to help. But the outside researchers must be committed to cooperating in the process and to learning, not just teaching. They must work at the direction of the community members not the other way around. Their role is to help.

Too often community groups have been expected to be passive participants in the research process. Researchers have seen them as valuable because they can provide access to a “research population,” such as people living with AIDS. But many groups are refusing to have research done “to” them anymore.

Groups have a clear responsibility to protect their members or “clients” from exploitative research. To do this, groups must have control of the research process and community members must be full participants in the process.

To make community participation real, the methods used to collect information must be understandable, and must take into account people’s special needs.

The methods must make sense to people from the community. They must make it possible for people of various literacy levels to participate. As well, they must allow participation by people with hearing or sight impairment or other disabilities.

The research process must also take into account any other special needs people have. For example, people with day jobs will probably only be able to attend evening meetings. Some women’s participation may depend on having childcare available. Interviews or meetings with people with a physical disability need to be held in an accessible place. Many people may only be able to give limited time to the research process.

It is people who share the community’s concerns and problems who will know best how to be sensitive and respectful in dealing with
such issues. They must be involved in the decision-making for the research.

The decision-making process must be clear and accessible to participants. It will be necessary to decide which people from the community are going to have a say and why. What do they need in order to participate effectively? What do participants expect from each other? How will we communicate with the participants?

Clear decisions about these issues will provide guidelines or “terms of reference” to help keep on track and to deal with any problems that come up.

It will also be necessary to be clear about how the research process fits into the group’s other work. Group support and a commitment to acting on the research results are essential.

But what about objectivity? The idea of community control and ownership of the research process worries some people. They think that it will compromise the “objectivity” of the research. And they think that research must be objective to be good. Unless it’s objective, they say, it will be “biased.”

Our approach to action research challenges that.

Objectivity is defined as a distanced, external view “uncoloured by feelings or opinions.” Taken to its logical conclusion, it is the absence of a point of view. But everyone, even a researcher, has a point of view and feelings or opinions that are impossible to set aside completely. Bias is defined as “distortion of results by a neglected factor.” Often the “factor” people neglect is the researcher’s point of view. Pretending that people can put their opinions or feelings aside means ignoring an important factor in the research process. If researchers don’t acknowledge their views, they are more likely to produce research that is biased. Declaring up front what the researchers believe about the issue is a way to guard against bias.

Our approach to action research acknowledges that people who are working to bring about change or deliver a service often share the experience and interests of the people they work for and with. Their perspective and knowledge is valuable in defining the research questions and in carrying out the research.

On the other hand, sometimes people in a group do not have first-hand experience of the issue the group is working on.
They may have lots of assumptions they’ve never talked about. If these views aren’t declared, they will still influence the research but it won’t be so easy to see how.

Rather than ignoring all of these assumptions and opinions, declare them. Stating them and recognizing them as part of what defines the research makes it possible to examine them throughout the process.

In addition, include a statement of assumptions in reporting on the research, so others can make their own judgments about what influenced the research.

**How Action Research Works**

The kind of research we’re recommending provides an analysis of issues based on a description of how people actually experience those issues.

Asking people about their experience is the respectful thing to do. It also makes sense. It makes it possible to learn about social structures and their impact on people. This process can help us to see why the problems are so hard to solve, and what can be done about them.

We know that the majority view doesn’t include everyone. Often it’s the less powerful people who are excluded. In fact, the method of research we present in this guide was developed by feminists because women’s experience was too often excluded from research. We needed a method to document and include women’s experience. Until feminism, men’s view was assumed to include women.

It’s clear that other groups in society have been left out too. For example, until lesbians and gay men began to organize, it was assumed that the heterosexual view included everyone. Until antiracist work is done, societies typically assume the dominant view is the only valid one. Young people make assumptions about older people’s experience and views, and vice versa.

Research that begins with learning about people’s experience of a particular issue or problem enables us to build realistic strategies. It respects the fact that we all have different upbringings, play different roles in the world, have different expectations, and that we don’t experience the world in the same way.
How is action research useful?

All research begins with a question or problem. In action research, the main question is usually “how.” How do people experience a certain situation? How can we change things? Most often, in action research, we ask these questions in intensive interviews. Sometimes we use focus groups or questionnaires.

The questions we ask are usually open-ended questions. They encourage people to talk about their lives and concerns.

Often people don’t see themselves as being important enough to present information about their lives. They can’t believe that their accounts of their situations could be a valid basis for understanding a problem or a community. The research may provide one of the rare times anyone wants to hear what they have to say.

One of the fringe benefits of doing action research is that it can affirm people’s right to be listened to and understood.

The interview itself can also help people to get a new perspective on their situation. This, plus direct contact with respectful researchers who share their experience, may even encourage them to take action themselves.

The “how” questions are also useful to us as community activists. We often know that a problem exists. We know it from the people we work with, and likely from our own experience too. But we need to learn more about people’s experience of it so we can know how to change things.

For example, we know that depending on a food bank is hard and we want to know how to make changes that would make life a bit easier. We can find out by systematically asking some of the people who use the food bank. How do they manage? How do they think things could be changed to help them deal with the problems they face?

Sometimes we want to do research to convince people to change. Maybe we want to convince the government to change its policy or give us funding. Of course, it’s important to remember that the research itself won’t change anything. It can give us ammunition, but we still have to use it and act on it.

Doing action research is a chance to check our assumptions. Sometimes we realize we’ve been making assumptions about what
works. For example, AIDS groups work to educate people to practice safer sex. They develop the best pamphlets and media campaigns they can. They may do evaluation too, of how effectively the pamphlet or campaign communicates. The assumption is that education will make people change their behavior. But what if education isn’t working? Maybe research can help. How do people deal with sexuality issues? What motivates people to practice safer sex? What makes that difficult to do? Answers to these kinds of questions can point the way to more effective approaches.

Doing research to check what we take for granted is especially useful when we don’t share the experience of the people our group works with.

Perhaps we are working to assist people in a community to have more say in the decisions that affect them. Rather than assuming we know what empowers people, we can check on how empowerment works for them. We might get them to describe situations where they have power, and where they don’t. What does empowerment look like? What, in their experience, makes it happen?

It can help us make sense of our experience. Action research can be particularly useful in helping us to get a clearer picture of our community. How does it actually work from our perspective? How does our experience fit into the larger picture? How does the way the community works impact on our lives? What does it tell us about why we experience problems? Where are there openings for change?

Action research can help us to claim our own perspective and speak from our own experience. It can show us the richness and complexity of our own experience. With this knowledge, we are in a better position to develop realistic and workable strategies.

An Example

Women living in single industry towns in the North often complained about “cabin fever.” They got very depressed in the long winters and had difficulty dealing with their children or partners. Doctors and psychiatrists often labeled them as “depression with relationship problems” and prescribed tranquilizers.

Local women’s groups doing research on life for women in these towns interviewed many of these women. They asked them to talk about life in their community.

These interviews led the researchers to look into what kinds of social services and recreation facilities existed in these towns. There
wasn’t much for women. They investigated housing conditions too. They discovered that most houses were built according to southern standards. There was no indoor play space for children. The men often were away for months working. The snow kept women and kids cooped up inside for long stretches of time.

The women’s groups also reviewed studies that had been done about women’s experience of taking tranquilizers. Many reported the tranquilizers made them more depressed.

Putting it all together, it was clear that cabin fever isn’t an individual woman’s personal inability to cope. It’s a natural response, shared by many women, to inadequate housing and social services. Among other things, the groups organized programs to give women and children time apart. They lobbied for housing suitable for the northern environment. And they did educational work on what they’d learned about women’s experience, for the doctors and social workers in town and for women themselves.

Principles of Action Research

Research should lead to action. Research is not an end in itself. To be useful, it must be part of an action plan. Right from the start we have to be clear about how we’ll use the information we collect and analyze.

Often, groups assume they’ll just write a research report and that will be action enough. They forget that to be useful a report has to be distributed and acted on. Who’s the target audience? What will we do to reach them? How do we plan to interest them in the research report? What if we can’t? What other strategies will we pursue? Is a report on the research actually necessary?

Some groups can’t imagine doing an action plan before beginning the research. But being clear about action we might take can help us avoid getting caught up in research for its own sake. We can always add to our action plan and change it if we come up with more good ideas along the way.

If realistic ways to take action on the research aren’t clear from the very start, probably research is not the thing we need to do.

Work from the community’s perspective. We need to build our theory and analysis from people’s actual experience. So that’s
what our questions should focus on too.

The opposite approach is to base research on theories about an issue. Basing research theories can lead to looking at people’s experience to see how it fits the theories. The focus becomes proving or disproving theories and trying to fit people in. It’s easy then to miss what’s really going on. We may also feel pressure to focus on what might convince decision-makers or funders. But if we start our research with the questions or concerns of people from outside our community, the research will serve their interests, not the interests of the people we’re working with.

Keep it simple. It’s the down-to-earth questions that let people tell their stories. Asking too many questions makes people divide up their experience. Then it’s easy for the researchers to lose the full picture in its complexity. Often what we really need to learn about are the pieces that don’t fit.

Also, if people are to participate in the research process, the methods have to be easy to understand and use. Complicated research methods can obscure the important questions and disempower the people the research is meant to serve.

And, of course, community groups don’t have lots of time and money to spend doing research. We need realistic methods that will fit into our work without overburdening us.

For example, a group of transition house workers wanted to interview former residents of the house. They developed a list of research questions and designed a questionnaire. It was 10 pages long and had lots of checklists in it. It felt wrong. They tried again, asking themselves. “What do we really need to know?” They came up with an interview guide of five open-ended questions, with a few follow-up questions for each.

Said one researcher, “It’s liberating! I’d begun to dread using our unwieldy questionnaire. Now we’re all excited about the chance to talk with the women without that burdensome thing in our way.”

Let the research questions determine which research tool to use. To figure out which tool will work best requires working through each of the research questions. Part 2 of this guide describes how to do this and how to develop the research tools.

It’s important in this process to ask ourselves whether doing research is really necessary. Maybe we can take action, without doing research first. We need to check the research others have done, and
figure out whether it answers our questions. We may have a very particular concern that others haven’t addressed, but it’s wise to check. We may also find information we can use later, to add to the findings of our own research.

Follow the action research rules. Action research, like any other kind of research, has rules. They are straightforward. There are good reasons for each one. The rules are guidelines to ensure that we do good research and that people can participate in the process. Since participation is essential to action research, it’s important that the rules are easy to understand. (See our Action Research Rules on page 16.)

What if we want help with the research? Many groups have successfully carried out action research on their own. The approach we’re using here has been developed specifically to make that possible.

However, if we decide we want help, we need to take the time to figure out what kind of help.

Often groups think it would be easier to just hand over the whole thing to an “expert” researcher or consultant. But, of course, to honor its responsibility to its members and clients, the group will have to understand and direct the process. Also, the more involvement we have in the research, the more we’ll learn and the better able we’ll be to act on the results. So it’s necessary to define the ways an outsider might help and how s/he will work with us.

One way is in the very early stage. Some groups have used a consultant to help them work through the process of sorting out whether they need to do research at all. The consultant meets with the group to discuss its questions and considers where to look for answers. The group then decides how to proceed.

Another possibility is at the point of putting together the research design. A consultant may be very helpful in suggesting how the various pieces can fit into one process. Again, the group itself must first identify all the pieces and make the final decisions.

A consultant can be useful if we get stuck on how to get answers to our research questions. Maybe s/he can work with the group to develop an interview guide. Maybe the group needs an outline of the possible research tools and how they work, in order to choose the ones that will work best. Or perhaps a consultant can provide information on how to do interviews or conduct a focus group.
Action Research Rules

1) The research has a design or plan.
The research design outlines:
• The specific research questions
• What kinds of information to collect, and why
• How to collect it, from whom, or where

This makes it possible for everyone involved in doing the research to know what’s going on. That, in turn, makes it easier for them to participate. The design or plan is a way of being accountable. It’s like a road map. It allows others to see what our intentions were and how we’re meeting them.

Putting the plan together helps the participants to be clear and focused. Having an overall plan makes the process manageable. It’s also the framework that makes it possible to see how to make any changes that become necessary during the research process.

2) Agree upon the questions or topics to be covered in advance.
This makes the process systematic. It also makes it possible to compare and analyze the information people provide. The research methodology is made up of these questions and topics, along with the research design and a description of how we followed it.

3) Declare the assumptions.
This will help to avoid producing biased research. It also makes the research process more open.

4) Respect Confidentiality.
A group must retain the right to restrict or deny access to its confidential files. Researchers must never talk about the research in progress outside of the research committee. Researchers must develop coding systems and rules that will protect the confidentiality of the people who are interviewed or answer questionnaires, etc.

5) Take experience into account.
The aim is to produce an analysis that reflects the richness and diversity of what the people said. This is also how we fulfill our responsibility to the people who participated in the research. Would they be able to recognize themselves and their situation in our analysis? Keeping this question in mind will help us avoid jumping to conclusions.

6) Provide “checkable” evidence.
We need to give our audience enough information to decide whether they would have reached the conclusions we did. Tell them what questions were asked, of whom, and why. We need to explain what we had assumed when we started the research, and what we learned. Give an accurate account of what the people said.
An Example

A People Living with AIDS (PLWA) group decided to do research to find out how to help PLWAs deal with discrimination in health care and housing, and so on. They knew that there are no simple answers. And they knew it would be important to look at many social and economic aspects of people’s lives.

They knew of a researcher with an excellent reputation. They asked him to help. He listened to their research questions and went away to develop a research design. When he presented the design to members of the group, they disagreed with his focus. Basically, he proposed to do before-and-after testing of people who’d attended the group’s workshops.

The group members found it very difficult to disagree with the researcher. After all, he was the “expert.” They couldn’t understand the details and the language, and the research methodology. They decided not to do the research.

Eventually they found a consultant they could work with. This researcher understood their perspective and worked with them to develop a research design, and methods that reflected their questions.

What to look for in a consultant. For action research, a consultant must have particular skills. Here’s a checklist:
• respects the group’s responsibility and right to control the process
• understands the group’s issues
• is not detached, but is committed to working with group participants to help them carry out the research
• is a good facilitator, not controlling
• is confident enough to be flexible, and is able to adapt methods to suit the group’s situation
• is able to explain methods clearly, so that non-researchers can understand them
• is clear about what s/he can and can’t do
• is someone the group is comfortable with

To find such a person will involve searching. It’s often useful to ask other groups for their recommendations. Look in the community as well as in universities and colleges. Interview any potential consultants. Ask for their views on the issues. Ask for examples of their work with other groups. Check with those groups. Once the group has decided on someone, draw up an agreement of what the consultant’s role is, and how the group and the consultant will work together.
Citizen Research

Participatory research is people’s research. Since our very beginnings, we have survived individually and collectively by facing the challenges of life with ingenuity and curiosity, figuring things out, coming up with solutions, and taking needed actions. This is what has made it possible for us to devise technical inventions, to build communities and societies, and to create cultures. Participatory research is a deliberate attempt to recapture this very human activity and help ordinary citizens to carry it out deliberately and with concerted effort. The reason we need to do this now is that, in this age of intense specialization and hierarchical power distribution, we have become too dependent on experts to decide what our needs are and how we should go about meeting them. This is a dangerous tendency because the experts’ self-interests are not always aligned with the common good of the citizenry.

The word “research” conjures up in our minds academic enterprises carried out by experts in institutional settings, such as laboratories. But at the core of research is also the activity of finding knowledge that people need for problem solving on an everyday basis. To be effective in these situations we must have good information, we must know the whys and the hows, as well as the whats of the problem. It may be properly called research when the search for answers to such questions is conducted with deliberateness and in an organized way beyond the casual efforts people make every day. Clearly, then, the knowledge generating activity carried out by ordinary citizens in this manner is also research.

Participatory research, however, is quite different from the expert variety in important ways. First, it directly addresses people’s practical problems that arise in their daily struggles for material, psychic, and social well-being. What is more important, these problems are what people themselves recognize as important to address, not what experts postulate as problems based on some theoretical or abstract understanding. Second, it is the people with the problems to solve who do the actual research. A trained researcher may help in this process as a catalyst, organizer, facilitator, or resource person, but it is the people themselves who formulate, conduct, and learn from the research. Third, the goal of
participatory research is to actually bring about change by engaging in beneficial social activities. Social action is an integral part of participatory research. Participatory research is research of the people, by the people, and for the people. It is fundamentally democratic in its aims and its procedures.

Forms of Knowledge

This formulation makes it clear that participatory research deviates from the canons of research methods prescribed in the conventional social sciences. As such it raises the question of whether participatory research can produce objective knowledge that is valid when it is conducted by people who have a stake in the outcome. To answer this question adequately would require more space than I have here. However, it is useful to point out that this question is rooted in a mistaken belief that all knowledge is a kind of representation of reality, the essence of which research can reveal. But we do not have to accept this assumption to produce knowledge adequate to solving urgent problems we face on a daily basis. The value of knowledge needed for dealing with many problems rests on whether it leads to workable solutions. It does not depend on its certified validity as the revealer of reality. What is more important, not all knowledge that we have as social beings is representational, concerned with the workings of an objective reality. This kind of representational knowledge is only one among the forms of knowledge that we need to live as human beings in community and society. The other forms are the reflective and the relational, for which the question of validity has to be modified or even abandoned.

Representational knowledge, the prototype of which is what natural science produces, is about things that we describe or explain as objects of knowing. It is typically based on observations and requires a degree of detachment on the part of the server, the knower. This kind of knowledge is expressed as propositions that state such and such is the case, as in “The earth goes around the sun.” Reflective knowledge, on the other hand, pertains to the realm of human values in which questions of right and wrong, good and bad, are raised. It speaks to how things ought to be, not how they are. It is normative, not necessarily in the sense of conformity but of righteousness of action and is informed by thoughtful reflections carried out in social contexts. It is sometimes called critical consciousness and may go against the status quo. Principled actions aimed at social change express and generate reflective knowledge.

Lastly, relational knowledge is the understanding we have of others as human beings and partners in relationships. It is the
experience of being familiar with someone felt directly and emotionally. It comes from shared moments of life. In its most intense manifestation, physical intimacy captures the essence of relational knowledge. To put it succinctly, to be in a relationship is to know someone; relationship is a kind of knowing in and of itself.

Examples

Participatory research is a way of generating all three forms of knowledge, although its explicit aim is often expressed in terms of solving concrete social problems affecting citizens that require the use of representational knowledge. To elaborate on these ideas, I would like to discuss a successful example of participatory research.

A group of Montana farmers got together in the earlier 1980s and formed an entity called Alternative Energy Resource Organization (AERO). Members were troubled by the prevailing agricultural conditions in much of the country, especially in the great Western farm belt. The economy of large-scale agriculture, with its heavy reliance on the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, was causing damages to the environment, making it difficult for the farmers to make a decent living. Many families were losing their farms and were forced to alter the way of life they had cherished for generations. This reflection moved the farmers to engage in concerted efforts to seek alternative ways of farming with the help of AERO, which led to sustainable agriculture that relied mostly on non-chemical, organic methods. They experimented with these methods in small groups and came together to share their findings and to help each other try them out on their own farms. After a decade, and spurred on by early successes, the farmers continued to expand their operations and to establish an ecologically and economically viable agricultural system allowing them to maintain the more traditional farm way of life.

This example highlights a few key points that illustrate the nature of knowledge involved in participatory research. First, starting with a critical evaluation of the agricultural economy, the AERO farmers had to come up with an effective solution to the problem by correctly analyzing and understanding the causes of the situation. This clearly involved representational knowledge. Second, the farmers’ dissatisfaction stemmed from their sense of things having gone wrong for them in terms of the values they held, and they took a stance. Reflective knowledge is evident in the farmers’ collective assessments and actions since this form of knowledge entails soul searching and living up to one’s conviction. And, finally, what made this endeavor possible was the existing
community ties through which the farmers shared their experiences and visions, and in the end the project brought them together even closer as a community. This is relational knowledge at work.

Another example is an often-cited Appalachian land ownership study. In this project, a coalition of community groups in the region got together with local citizens after a flood in 1977 to deal with the dire poverty affecting the region. This flood, which devastated many residents, was the catalytic event that brought to the fore their endemic poverty and galvanized concerned citizens and community organizations to do something about it. They investigated the relationship between the patterns of land ownership and the poverty of the region, with the purpose of improving the situation. The research led to the discovery that local tax structures were undermining the community well-being. The absentee owners of large mines paid relatively little tax, contributing to the impoverishment of the communities and putting unfair tax burdens on the residents.

For participants, this research finding confirmed a local suspicion held by residents the political economic structure was stacked against them. With this knowledge, they were aroused to take action to reform the tax codes in many localities. One of the explicit goals of this project was to strengthen network ties among the various community organizations, researchers, and concerned citizens of the region. As a result of working together intensely for a number of years on the project, the participants were able to establish a relational foundation and to launch new initiatives, which deepened the ties already developed.

Yet another example concerns community-based health care in a rural county of North Carolina. People in that region were feeling that the health care available for many of the residents was inadequate, and there were many complaints about it. In response, a coalition consisting of a health education group, a community-based medical practice, and a local college undertook to help residents of the area come together to air their community health needs and develop measures for improving the health care system. This resulted in modifications in the way health care was delivered by local physicians, the institution of community health education initiatives, and the establishment of preventive health programs.

In the process, the communities made known their health needs, which had been a source of much frustration and anger. The underlying principle of the project was the concept of com-
munity-oriented primary care that requires citizen participation in health promotion. Participatory research efforts resulted in widened involvement of citizens in health planning and service delivery activities. This strengthened the ties among existing networks of groups and individuals. The participants in the project also organized activities to raise critical consciousness about health care issues at the local and national levels. In addition, some of the innovations introduced involved political confrontations with elites. Upsetting the existing power structures is typical of participatory research.

Participation

The discussion thus far has shown that knowledge to guide us in pursuing proper goals for ourselves as social beings— to know right from wrong, good from bad, and to act on our convictions is a form of knowledge distinguishable from the representational. It has to do with the question of values and norms that we establish collectively in the course of staking out a life together and committing ourselves to it. We can and must bring our rational faculties to this enterprise. In a democratic society, it surely cannot be a product of indoctrination or privileged, private inspiration from a leader. The exercise of this capacity for rationally establishing collective norms for ourselves is our birthright as free beings who can act with autonomy and responsibility. The promise of democracy embodies the right of self-determination. To function as active members of a democratic society, we need to be able to deal with the questions of right and wrong with as much deliberateness and intellectual effort as we would devote to the understanding of how objective reality works and how to solve technical problems. We must gain reflective knowledge.

The terminology here is intended to underline the fact that we generate this kind of knowledge through rational examinations and discussions with fellow citizens concerning issues that affect us in common. It entails reflection on social conditions, taking into account different aspects of the issues presented from diverse points of view and different courses of action. Democracy requires a citizenry informed by different kinds of knowledge, and the reflective is one of them.

Participation is at the foundation of democracy, because in its ideal form democracy means self-governance. This can only be achieved if we get involved in the business of making public decisions and engaging in social actions. We are free only when we are able to partake in the processes of self-determination. The same logic holds even in large societies in which direct participation in government is not practicable and, as a consequence, a form of representation is instituted instead. In such instances, we come close to
the realization of democratic ideals only to the extent that citizens participate in elections and in on-going activities to keep the elected officials accountable to their constituents in their public actions. Citizens must have a voice in deciding and expressing what actions need to be taken for the common good, involving questions of ends as well as means, of values as well as methods.

What we see here is reflective knowledge. This kind of knowledge is not a product of private, individual contemplation but results from ideas and ideals tempered in public arenas in which beliefs, propositions, opinions, sentiments, and prejudices are presented, listened to, debated, and modified by means of rational discourse aimed at shared understanding for the common good.

In participatory research citizens acquire reflective knowledge by raising questions that lie behind the concrete problems that present themselves for solution, such as violence and drug dealing. In the process of seeking solutions to these problems, citizens who are engaged in participatory research pose larger questions, such as what social, political, and economic factors are related to violence and drug dealing, how else the intractable problem might be dealt with besides resorting to conventional remedies, such as more police surveillance and more prisons. Put another way, participatory research does not stop with questions regarding the means for achieving these ends.

These questions include queries like “What remedy will work?” Relying on reflective knowledge, participants go deeper to look into the efficacy of conventional remedies, asking what makes them work and, if they do not work, why they are continued in the face of evident failure. Such a line of inquiry, if allowed to continue, leads to an examination of the basic societal assumptions underlying the way the problems are socially constructed and dealt with. It also leads to the realization that unless these assumptions are revamped and the problems reconceptualized no meaningful solution is possible. Tackling problems at this level constitutes what is termed double-loop learning and has implications for radical solutions—the real power of participatory research.

Another important function of participation in public affairs is an educational one. Citizens learn the craft of democratic participation by practicing first at the local and micro level, where the issues are more directly experienced and the relevance of the actions to be taken is more transparent. Also, at this level, people engage in decision-making processes in interaction with
fellow citizens with whom they share common concerns and have on-
going direct contact. A prototype of this kind of participation is local politics, in neighborhoods or wards, in which citizens get together to deal with specific issues of limited scope in both geographic and substantive terms. Civic organizations and workplaces are also potential sites for rehearsing democracy. Taking part in broader public arenas, such as large cities, states, and nations, is much more difficult for ordinary citizens with little or no political connections, experience, or training.

Participatory research is a framework in which citizens can practice democracy by dealing with concrete problems that are of immediate concern to them; it provides a forum in which citizens can participate in discussions of what should be done. People can raise questions about what problems should be addressed, and why, as well as searching for the best means to solve them in technical terms. In this way, participatory research helps people to acquire reflective knowledge, which is requisite for an informed citizenry in democracy, and inculcates the habit of asking normative questions concerning public affairs. It acts as a problem-oriented training ground for participation in the public sphere.

Community

The effective functioning of democracy requires active involvement of citizens in the public sphere. Before this can occur, however, a social matrix loosely referred to as the community must be in place where meaningful participation is made possible. Community implies a network of people who share common interests and are connected to one another through continual interaction. These are only the minimum constituent elements needed for a community, but they serve as the basis for developing the others. Community is a necessary condition for meaningful participation in the workings of democracy, and participatory research plays a role in making community possible.

Meaningful participation in a functioning democracy means more than casting ballots for candidates or referendum questions. The opinions and convictions expressed in this act are already products of prior considerations, however carelessly made and attenuated, on the merit of the candidates or issues in question. These considerations include personal preferences, ideological commitments, and calculations of consequences, short- and long-term. But personal considerations are never the pristine creation of the individual, issuing from his or her inner being free from outside influences. What we express as a solitary act in the voting booth is the net sum of our interactions with outside people and institutions, whether or not we are aware of them. The act of voting is only the end point in the
process in which our preferences are formed. This does not mean that we somehow act as an extension of the community, but rather that there is a process of more or less participation in community that precedes the act of voting—the superficial symbol of democracy.

The degree and the quality of the participation that results in citizens’ decisions in the act of casting a vote vary a great deal. And the test rests on this criterion. In a healthy democratic society, citizens must be able to engage in discussions of civic issues in groups in which they express frank opinions with the expectation of being listened to, and they must in turn consider others’ views respectfully and with an open mind. These are characteristics of a dialogue carried out for the sake of arriving at mutual understanding, if not consensus, rather than for the sake of winning an argument or persuading others. When this sort of conversation is carried out with the commitment to the standards of discourse that value the rationality of the argument, the resulting insight carries the weight of a compelling proposition because it is reasonable. This kind of dialogic approach to being informed about a public issue is a profoundly educational activity in which we learn to develop our own thinking and feelings in the crucible of community interaction.

These days citizens inform themselves about vital issues less frequently through this sort of participatory process. What informs the citizenry instead is mostly one-way communication from the public sources of information, especially the commercially produced mass media dedicated to profit making, rather than enlightenment. And there are now fewer opportunities for citizens to meet in groups. This situation does not allow for citizen dialogues leading to the formation of reasoned decisions. It thereby deprives them of opportunities to participate in democratic processes that precede or supersede the act of voting.

This trend has the danger of rendering voting itself meaningless, as it tends to become nothing more than an emotional expression of preference among artificially constructed choices, divorced from the exchange of ideas in a community. Voter apathy, which has reached a scandalous level in this country, is the inevitable consequence of robbing citizens of their participatory rights.

This ideal of rationally conducted communication presupposes certain social conditions that have become increasingly difficult to meet. In order for people to be able to talk to one another frankly with the expectation of being listened to with
respect, there must be a level of interpersonal trust. They must be able to count on a commitment to the goal of arriving at shared understanding and on the sincerity in engaging in rational discourse. These conditions are difficult to realize in practice, and they can only be approximated in most situations, but they are probably no more unrealistic than the attainment of the objectivity required of representational knowledge. In any event, this kind of trust can only come from people knowing one another and establishing connections through sustained interaction over a period of time, as loved ones, relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Knowledge that resides in these kinds of relationships does not describe or portray another person as an object, as in representational knowledge, but rather consists of sharing some aspects of life, whether it be a common history, common interests, common activities, common experiences, common understanding, or a common fate. It is relationship itself and is, for this reason, referred to as relational knowledge here. Relational knowledge is the sinew that binds a community together. It is what makes it possible for people to engage in earnest conversations about matters of importance for the common good.

Participatory research is a collective endeavor in which citizens come together to solve a common problem and, in the process, engage in activities requiring that they interact with and get to know one another. That is, it produces relational knowledge, as well as the representational and the reflective. While it is true that dialogue plays an important role in the generation of all three kinds of knowledge in participatory research, it has a special significance for relational knowledge. To dialogue means to enter a common space in which those in dialogue share their understandings of objective reality to get a better grip on the problem they are trying to solve, reflect on the social construction of the problem, and pose questions at the level of societal assumptions. But more importantly, it is a way of being human in relationships with others in which individuals come close to each other with the attitude of listening, being open, and sharing, requiring discipline and concerted effort. Participatory research realizes its potential as a community building vehicle by helping citizens practice dialogue in this sense for the production of relational knowledge.

It is a commonly accepted view that community has been in decline since the advent of the modern age, and it can be contended that the contributing factors are embedded in the political economy of the era. This decline is also related to the decreasing voter participation in this country. Contrary to what some communitarians would propose, it is unlikely that people can revitalize and recon-
struct community and make it possible for citizens to practice democracy more vigorously by inculcating its value as a matter of virtue.

Without significant changes in the larger system, which has weakened the viability of community, any community resuscitation efforts are likely to fail, and democracy will suffer. Needed changes in the larger social system can come about only through the efforts of many disaffected people acting in concert and in different sites. They need to engage in the solution of the problems that affect them in their daily lives, and at the same time to direct their critical gaze at the root causes of their social problems.

This calls for the simultaneous production of both representational and reflective knowledge, which participatory research has as its epistemological objective. But participatory research is also a community effort in that it is only possible when people with problems act collectively using relational knowledge. At the same time, its exercise leads to an increase in relational knowledge, thus strengthening community. This mirrors the dialectical logic of democracy. Democracy makes participation possible but it is also participation that makes democracy. It is through this kind of spiraling process that participatory research can contribute to the health of democracy.

Practice

In the case of the AERO, the farmers who were dissatisfied with the existing system of agriculture formed a new group to explore alternatives. This is almost a textbook case. In the other two cases, however, the initial involvement of existing civic and professional organizations is evident. Participatory research is citizen activity emerging from community concerns, but it often takes an organized body to mobilize it. Furthermore, members of these organizations are often professionals, researchers, educators, health workers, who are not necessarily directly affected by the everyday problems of the community. Often it is outsiders (in both the literal and figurative senses) who facilitate the participatory research process.

Social scientists typically play this facilitating role as participatory researchers. They may get involved with a project by invitation from the community. More typically, however, social scientists, who have become familiar with the general situation of the community through their personal contact and/or as a result of their previous research come forward to work with the community. They then engage in conversations with interested parties
towards a collaboration, and an organizational structure, which may include a coalition of interested individuals or organizations. If outside funding is needed, it is the job of this nascent organization to secure it.

At this initial, organizing phase, participatory researchers have to make it clear to the people in the community that it is they who are in charge throughout the project from defining the problems, to researching relevant questions, and to taking appropriate actions. Researchers’ roles, however, are more than that of hired hands who can provide assistance with technical skills. They share their intellectual understanding of the situation as professionals, as well as personal concerns with the community partners, so that it can be considered together with input from other sources in planning the project. This process involves negotiating with different segments of the community, including those who have power and vested interests in promoting a particular stance or approach.

Modern communities are usually not organic wholes composed of tightly integrated individuals; people participate in community affairs with more or less commitment and may or may not agree on issues. Consequently, it is unlikely that a participatory research project will succeed in getting everybody in the community involved, or in getting unanimous endorsement of objectives. It is, however, important that a significant part of the community is mobilized to ensure its success. One of the first tasks for participatory researchers, then, is to work for the cooperation and the commitment of a meaningful segment of the citizenry.

There are three distinctive phases in participatory research in which investigative skills are needed. The first is in articulating the problems that motivate the project. Although these problems may be plain to see and widely felt in the community, specific symptoms have to be identified so that they can be dealt with. Community dialogues conducted for this purpose occupy a central place in participatory research, but other research approaches are also important. This phase requires research skills such as designing data collection and analysis plans, which social scientists can bring to the table. It is, however, critically important that relevant members of the community participate in deciding what methods to use and how to use them. And where possible, it is also important to get members of the community involved in actual data collection and analysis, by providing training if necessary. Although not the main purpose of participatory research, building research capacity within the community is an important way of strengthening its ability to solve its own problems.
The next research task is to figure out what should be done. For this purpose it is useful to be able to see the underlying causes of the specific symptoms delineated, using dialogic procedures specifically developed for groups, as well as the more conventional data analysis techniques of the social sciences. The participatory researcher’s job here is to facilitate community participants’ engagement in the group processes and the analytical procedures.

On the basis of these activities, the community then moves on to fashioning concrete actions or institutional mechanisms for addressing issues. This calls for research of another kind, i.e., scanning and assessing available options. This requires access to reference materials and resource persons, to which the participatory researcher can serve as a conduit. The actual research at this point is better done by the people themselves, but participatory researchers can help by offering their knowledge of various avenues to explore.

From this point on, the role of participatory researchers diminish in importance, and should eventually disappear, because now the project moves into the action choice and implementation phase, in which the community takes center stage. Participatory researchers may, of course, get involved in the ensuing actions as fellow citizens to the extent that their involvement is meaningful for all parties concerned.

There is one last research segment remaining in participatory research, which comes after the actions have been taken. The successes and shortfalls of the project must be assessed in terms of what the community originally set out to do, and this to must be done using the participatory research principles. This means, among other things, that the community must set the criteria for the evaluation and must get involved in carrying out research. An outside evaluation may be conducted because of funding source requirements or for other administrative reasons, but this cannot substitute for the internal participatory evaluation. One important reason for this is that participatory evaluation uses as criteria the effects of generating reflective, relational and representational knowledge, unlike conventional evaluation, which usually recognizes only outcomes that can be measured by representational knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The completion of a participatory research project often generates further problems and questions, which propels another cycle of research and action. Solving a set of problems can en-
courage a community to tackle other related problems or can create unanticipated consequences that require concerted attention. The initial problems that a community addresses in participatory research are embedded in the workings of larger social institutions and are not isolated from other social issues. In view of this, discovering the causes of the relative success or failure of a project provides a valuable lesson that a community can learn and apply to other situations. Built into participatory research is the need to reflectively evaluate on its outcome, to start again by learning from it, and to repeat the process. This creates a forward movement toward posing new problems and raising questions about underlying social causes. It is for this reason that participatory research has the potential to get closer to the core values of a democratic society and to meet its challenges.

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Town & Gown
Making Research Serve Communities’ Needs
Miriam Axel-Lute, 2000
www.loka.org/town&gown.htm

When a group of ministers from the poorest neighborhoods in East St. Louis, with the help of State Representative Wyvefter H. Younge, approached the University of Illinois in 1987 about creating a partnership, they posed five conditions in writing to the university. Residents, not faculty or funders, had to both have control over the research agenda and be involved in every step of the research process. The University had to make a five-year minimum commitment, and had to be willing to engage in policy development, implementation, and the formation and support of a community controlled nonprofit to work on neighborhood revitalization. The University agreed, and the Urban Extension Minority Access Program, which later became the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) was born.

ESLARP’s ground rules were a reaction against traditional research, the bulk of which is done to benefit militaries, corporations, or academic careers, not the public interest. Academic researchers who study poor communities have become notorious for treating
them like growths in a petri dish. “Traditionally, research has been done on communities, not-with them,” says Jill Chopyak, Executive Director of the Loka Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to democratizing science and technology. “Research is generally seen as an elite process.”

Despite these dangers, communities like East St. Louis have found that linking up with academics who are willing to learn new ways of working has made research start to work for them. These varied partnerships are often called “community-based research”. For instance, says Chopyak, in the well-publicized case of water contamination in Woburn, Massachusetts, residents knew something was wrong, “but without working with researchers they couldn’t draw statistical conclusions about cause and effect.” Or in Chicago, a group that wanted to work on health problems formed a concrete focus from research that showed traffic accidents were the second most common reason for hospitalization in their neighborhood.

Loka Institute’s study “Community Based Research in the U.S.” compared the U.S. to the Netherlands, where a network of “science shops” associated with universities receives research questions from citizens and citizen groups, gives them to faculty and students, and returns the answers to the askers. For the U.S. to match the Netherlands’ per capita number of community research studies, Loka estimates the U.S. would have to have 13 times the current number of community research centers.

Universities and Community Groups as Partners

The Policy Research Action Group (PRAG), a collaborative research partnership between universities and community-based organizations in Chicago, borrows from the science shop model. Four universities and 15 community-based organizations are the primary affiliates. Like most community-based research in the U.S., PRAG moves beyond the science shops and deeply involves communities in the research process itself.

PRAG supports community research projects in two ways. The Community Studies Internship Program assigns students to work for and with community organizations, as well as a faculty sponsor. The program is open to any community organization, not just PRAG’s community partners. Community organizations submit proposals describing a research need. PRAG’s six co-chairs, representing both universities and Community Based Organizations (CBOS), select proposals. Since 1992, PRAG has supported over 130 community organizations with projects in
healthcare, housing, refugee rights, jobs, environment, education, diversity, and more, and has inspired similar programs in other cities.

PRAG also coordinates larger collaborative research projects undertaken by university and community affiliates. Either side can originate ideas for these projects but always flesh them out jointly. Each project has two paid coordinators, one from the university and one from the community group. Everything, from representation on PRAG’s governing body to credit for the work, is shared equally.

Two collaborative projects between the Humboldt Park Development Council, on the West Side of Chicago, and DePaul University illustrate the effect of a group like PRAG. From 1996 to 1998, without PRAG’s involvement, the development council partnered with the university in a HUD grant for youth, housing, and economic development. Sheila Perkins, then director of HPDC, says at the beginning it barely counted as a collaboration. “DePaul had an opportunity to get $500,000 and needed a community group to work with and we were picked,” she says. “They didn’t think through the community participation part at all. I think they expected to breeze in and help the poor little black folks get their neighborhoods together. The perception by all of the academics was that neighborhoods are poor because people don’t do what they need to do, and residents have given up and they need to come in and save them.”

One example of their disrespectful attitude, says Perkins, was a program called Urban Plunge, “where a group of white students came out into our neighborhood to spend the night to see what it was like to be poor.” At least DePaul was eventually receptive when the community spoke up, she says, although “it was not a quiet conversation.” DePaul hired a community liaison, and worked with the council to revamp their grant plans based on a better understanding of true community participation.

In 1997, PRAG coordinated a joint project between the development council and the university on black churches and community development. This time, the research idea was the community’s, and DePaul communicated with the community groups before every step. Once the basic goal was designed, the university continued working with residents to carry it out. Community leaders, for example, helped university researchers realize they had to make personal contacts, not use surveys, to get input from pastors. The final report itself was developed in a joint meeting.
The research resulted in a minister’s retreat on community development, several ministers’ engagement with other community groups and agencies, and a report with concrete recommendations for both churches and community groups. Perkins found the experience far more successful than the first. She credits the PRAG staff’s good understanding of what constitutes valid community input, and their acknowledgement that the universities don’t have all the answers, as the basic factors that make working with them more effective. In fact, she has suggested that PRAG provide general training to all academics, beyond those working directly with their projects.

**One Community Group, Many Experts**

Unlike PRAG, the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI), has no institutional affiliations with universities, only working relationships with individual academics. JCCI, a 25-year-old group with an active volunteer base, produces two studies every year on an issue of importance in the Jacksonville, Florida area. Past study topics have included the distribution of public services, negative perceptions of young Black men, and the quality of public education. Currently they are working on affordable housing and regional cooperation.

JCCI actively solicits ideas for study topics through its newsletter, local media, and extensive outreach to grassroots organizations, minority community leaders, churches, etc. JCCI staff select 10 to 15 of the responses that fit a set of basic criteria, such as how long it will take to look into and how wide a range of people it affects. These are reviewed in a careful five-week selection process by a volunteer committee, who represent a diversity of interest, gender, age, race, and previous involvement in the process.

Once topics are selected, every JCCI study is carried out by a “study committee” of 40-70 volunteers who meet weekly from fall to spring. Staff at JCCI cull background material for the group and do administrative work, while various “resource people,” many from local universities, are called to committee meetings to present specific needed information, reports, or data. However, it is the volunteer committee that calls all the shots, makes the analysis, and decides, by consensus, on the study’s conclusions and a set of recommendations for action.

An implementation task force follows up each study for two years. For example, after their GIS (Geographical Information System) maps showed an unequal distribution of public services
in 1994, the sheriffs office established a new sector system for
more equitable patrols, and the city published an “equity index”
on all public services for a few years, showing its improvement in
other areas. On average they have succeeded with a little over
half the recommendations, says Associate Director, David Swain.

It may be slower this way, but with a careful disciplined
structure, the benefits of involving a diverse range of people in a
group process are worth the extra time, says Swain. “Everyone’s
agenda is on the table and they can see what everyone thinks and
how they’ve all made up their minds already,” he describes. “And
then as they learn together, all of their preconceptions go down
the drain. The group process is a learning process.” Although
JCCI specifically recruits certain populations, including low-
income people, minorities, and youth, Swain admits to a lower
involvement of very low-income people, who have other time
priorities.

One Topic, Many Communities

Unlike JCCI and PRAG, which have a geographic focus,
some community-based researchers, like JSI Center for Environ-
mental Health Studies, are national but limited to a specific topic.
Neither a university nor a citizen-based organization, JSI is the
nonprofit wing of a for-profit health consulting firm, John Snow,
Inc. Among other activities, they conduct collaborative health
studies with communities that approach them, often groups with
a grant for technical assistance. When a community has a con-
cern about a toxic exposure, says Gretchen Lutowsky, director of
the center’s Community Technical Assistance Program, they often
don’t want to take the word of a study done by the responsible
party or even the government. “They want a study from someone
they can trust.” And since JSI works directly with the community
groups that contact them in conducting the research, “the ques-
tions that are asked are the ones they want answered.”

JSI helps citizen groups with environmental health con-
cerns learn how to access, understand, and use data. In keeping
with the spirit of community-based research, JSI emphasizes skills
transfer and training as much as specific information. “If we just
tell them what they need to know, it’s not theirs really,” says
Lutowsky. “The idea is they learn the skills that are necessary to
learn what they need to know.”

Due to the legally contentious atmosphere around many
questions of environmental health, JSI often testifies at public
hearings on behalf of a community, or conducts studies specifi-
ally needed for a lawsuit. Even when community members understand the information perfectly well, says Lutowsky, “sometimes it’s necessary to have a Ph.D. to testify.” Although this role of legitimizer can be tricky for academics who aim to promote the legitimacy of the community’s own expertise, many community leaders are frank about the advantages of association with a Ph.D. “It gave us a validity we didn’t have as just citizens,” says Vicki Kimmel Forby, director of the East St. Louis Emerson Park Community Development Corporation, a partner of ESLARP.

Benefits and Challenges

Community-based research differs from “traditional research” in more than just who is involved. Loka Institute’s survey of community-based research in the U.S identifies a number of unique benefits and challenges.

Research results are more likely to be useful and used. Because the impetus is to solve a problem, not prove or disprove a hypothesis, not only are the results going to be put into action, but if one avenue doesn’t work another will be pursued. In fact, Loka had originally planned to describe some unsuccessful projects in their survey, but had trouble finding any they could classify that way.

Involving community members in the actual research makes the results more accurate, because they bring their own knowledge of what’s going on. Cathy Klump, who heads ESLARP’s Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center, describes the design of an East St Louis park in 1995. ESLARP had landscape architecture students working with neighborhood children. The students kept drawing the benches along the periphery, and the kids kept saying, “No, they have to go in the middle.” This went against every design principle the students knew, but the kids finally explained that if the benches were on the outside their grandmothers wouldn’t be able to watch them closely, and they wouldn’t be allowed to use the park. In another case, says Klump, the university had identified a perfect parcel of land for new housing, only to have the community point out problems such as a train line that would keep everyone awake all night.

Community-Based research has unique challenges too. If academics and community members don’t overcome stereotypes and habits and learn to listen to one another, well-intentioned collaborative projects can replicate the unbalanced patterns of more traditional research. Academic practitioners often face reluctance from their institutions as well, or refusal to accept the validity of work that shares credit.
Practitioners have developed a number of ways to keep the reality of their projects in tune with their ideals. Some sign formal contracts at the beginning of their work spelling out procedures for accountability or lay down ground rules. Humboldt Park Development Council, for example, eventually insisted that students working with them couldn’t study people, only larger community issues. “They could interview people about neighborhood concerns,” says Perkins, “but no studying why Joe Green is poor.” They also demanded a copy of any research results, as community groups typically do in community-based projects. Community-based research centers like PRAG, whose staff are themselves neither the university researcher nor the community partner, can sometimes act as a mediator.

The Childhood Cancer Research Institute, in working with Native American tribes spread over a large distance, spends an extended period with each community, living with them and sharing meals, rather than zipping in and out for a formal meeting or survey. This kind of close involvement during the research process helps community representatives learn skills and confidence in dealing with academics, that are not only useful but start to shift the balance of power. In fact, by recognizing a community’s own knowledge, community based research can challenge even the basic idea that a university’s main contribution to a community-university partnership is fancy skills and technical expertise. Says Klump, “[The students] bring hard work. They bring a good naivete; they are able to learn and react and ask questions. Their asking of questions opens new doors for the group. They bring a lot of hope.” She does add, “And they bring a lot of skills,” but it’s almost an afterthought.

This, however, leads to another challenge, the time burden intensive research collaboration places on already over-extended community activists. ESLARP addresses this by working directly with residents, largely senior citizens, rather than the staff of existing service organizations. “They have such strong self-interest [in the conditions in their neighborhoods],” says Ken Reardon, a founder of ESLARP, “that if they feel a genuine commitment there from the university, people will respond.” By successfully involving residents who hadn’t been previously involved, he says ESLARP “mobilized an untapped reservoir of time and talent and commitment.”

Research is Not Enough

Even so, ESLARP ran up against the limits of even the most participatory of research styles. The university agreed to the ministers’ conditions and set to work using the methods of Participatory Action Research, a peer-to-peer model first developed in South
America. The neighborhood residents set the agenda and were involved in all stages of work. The first collaboration’s results, a 1990 neighborhood plan for the Emerson Park neighborhood, won an award from American Institute of Certified Planners. And yet, says Reardon, no one would fund or support implementing any part of it, because badly deteriorated East St. Louis was regarded as a lost cause. There was no buy-in from institutions outside the partnership, and the residents were still isolated.

So ESLARP added an organizing component to its work in 1991. As the group coordinated pressure on local governments, businesses, and funders, they began to see changes of heart, projects moving forward. ‘We were all ready to nominate ourselves for the Nobel Peace Prize,” admits Reardon, when he was called to a community meeting in early 1995. Residents, despite their apparent involvement, were finding the playing field so uneven in terms of skills and experience that they felt their contributions weren’t meaningful. Reardon recalls, “They said to us, ‘We’re not even the tail on the dog here. We’re not even the flea chasing the tail on the dog. We’re the fleas chasing the flea.’”

The residents pointed out that the students working with them were receiving 15 hours per week of training in planning, architecture, government relations, etc. and they were getting nothing. The empowerment ideal had not yet come to fruition.

So later that year ESLARP started a ‘neighborhood college,’ free adult education, modeled on Paolo Freire’s work - that gave residents an opportunity to reflect on and learn about relevant issues. They also added a Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center, since the university campus is 200 miles from East St. Louis.

These three components - participatory research/planning, organizing, and education - make a solid three-legged stool for ESLARP’s work, which they call “empowerment planning.” Reardon believes that in areas like East St. Louis, where there’s an extreme scarcity of economic power, power is very centralized or corrupt, and/or disinvestment has eroded community institutions, participatory research will not succeed without the organizing and education components.

Other community-based researchers agree that the research itself is only one piece. Lutowsky finds herself frequently recommending to groups who want to do health studies to instead organize directly to reduce the release of pollutants. “It’s very difficult to determine a [conclusive] health outcome,” she says. “You need a lot of money and large exposed population.” There
are also cases, Lutowsky points out, in which research is there and further research clouds the issue and prevents action. “Every major city in the US has a high asthma rate,” she fumes. “But we study it and study it and study it and we’re not doing nearly enough to reduce exposure, both indoors and outdoors.”

Creating Networks

As with any new endeavor, community-based research practitioners often feel isolated. Some networks have arisen to help end this isolation. Rutgers University’s Community University Consortium for Regional Environmental Justice (CUCREJ) is a region- and topic-specific coalition encompassing nine environmental justice groups and several universities in New York, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico. CUCREJ aims to share the practical aspects of environmental justice research with communities, says Consortium Director Michael Gelobter, through conferences, a resource center, and GIS information made available through the internet.

The Loka Institute, on the other hand, is internationally focused and concerned with a range of community-based research topics and approaches. Loka promotes community based research through research, op-eds, and the Community Research Network (CRN), a loose membership group of about 600 self-defined CBR practitioners.

Currently, the Community Research Network’s major project is developing a set of standards for community-based research. Taylor says this has become necessary because the idea of community-based research or at least the name, has become well-known enough for others to try to co-opt it and water it down. He says he now sees projects trying to claim the designation “community-based,” (and sometimes even the limited funding) merely because the researchers plan to go into a community, or because they got one community member to sign off.

Community Research Network’s principles will try to answer broad questions such as “What needs to be present to make a community-based research project fair and just?” and will include specific recommendations such as that results and resources must be shared with the community. It won’t be a simple process. Some groups already have their own sets of principles, says Taylor, and some of them disagree on basic questions such as whether the research question has to originate in a community. The principles were scheduled for publication in summer 2000.

The principles aim to bring the discussion of who research serves and how it should be done to a wider audience. At a time
when information is one of the most important commodities,
well-done community-based research can truly be an empowering
project.

**Role for Academics in Research for Social Change**

Recently, academics have discovered, or rediscovered, a
mission of community service that revolves around doing research
for social change. While it’s possible for academics to be mem-
bers of the communities where their research projects happen,
they are more often outsiders. When the academic is an outsider,
they occupy one of three roles.

The “initiator” enters the community and tries to start an
activist research project. Be wary of the initiator who approaches
you about working on their project. Unless that academic has a
community organizing background, the end result is as likely to be
further disarray as it is positive social change, because most aca-
demics are used to working in isolation from others, rather than in
coalition with them. They are also used to treating people with
fewer degrees as having less knowledge. I’ve seen case after case of
academics who blunder into communities with a project they are
going to do to them and end up only eroding the reputation of all
academics.

Academics who do have a community organizing back-
ground, however, can successfully act as an initiator, bringing
people together to build power as well as knowledge. You will
know who these academics are because they will ask what you
think needs to be done.

In the “consultant” role, academics act as they would when
consulting in any situation. The community commissions the
research project and the consultant carries it out. In the best
cases there is strict accountability to the community, with the
researcher checking with the community at each stage of the
research to get community input and guidance. Purists say the
community should always do the research themselves. But if the
community is already organized, and already busy working on
other projects, then having a consultant will do little harm and
hopefully much good. However, if the community is not orga-
nized, then the research itself can be an organizing tool and the
consultant’s role should not be to do the research for people but
to help them do it themselves.

In the “collaborator” role, pioneered by the Policy Research
Action Group in Chicago, the academic works hand-in-hand with
community members, recognizing that each brings unique talents to the table. The collaborative model argues that community members bring crucial experiential knowledge to the table, and academics bring important general and theoretical knowledge. Combining these two types of knowledge helps both. Community members can see and think through more alternatives and academics can better ground their thinking. By setting up an equal relationship, this model not only addresses the fear that the academic might further disempower the community, but also avoids a situation where researchers are in such a subservient relation to the community that they are less useful than they might be.

The collaborator role, more than any other, emphasizes relationship building between academics and community members. The collaborator academic is not there just to do a research project but to become a participant in a broader, bigger, social change project. An important element to keep in mind here is that the relationship between the academic and community residents does not start with a project, but with meetings, coffees, lunches, etc., until enough of a partnership is built up for everyone to feel like they’re ready to start a jointly controlled project.

Citizens As Experts
Working Papers, March/April 1981
Nick Kotz

Is government too complicated for citizens to understand? In 43 cities, neighborhood people have been trained to monitor community development outlays. The results often compare favorably with scholarly evaluations.

After months of sifting through files at city hall, comparing the rhetoric of government plans with the reality of poor neighborhoods, Carolyn Crawford reached a disturbing conclusion. City officials in Birmingham, Alabama had allocated their federal Community Development Block Grant funds in a coldhearted, possibly illegal manner, leaving the city’s thirty-one poorest neighborhoods unassisted, while targeting aid at the downtown and more promising neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, at the University of Pennsylvania, Steven Gale was accumulating a mountain of data about the same $11 million Birmingham program. In contrast to Crawford, however, he concluded that substantial sums, at least for housing rehabilitation, were reaching the poor.
Crawford, a citizen activist, and Gale, a university professor, are quite dissimilar practitioners within a growing industry: the government financed evaluation of government programs. In approaching the task of evaluation, Crawford and Gale differ not only in background but also in their resources, research methods, interests, and in the impact of their findings. Gale, chairman of the Regional Science Department of the University of Pennsylvania, leads a small army of academics who view their project as a means to advance scholarly research about the impact of federal aid on neighborhood change. Crawford, a former theology student, works for a coalition of low-income groups with a clear-cut stake in seeing their neighborhoods get their share of program benefits.

Gale’s University of Pennsylvania study, one in a long line of academic evaluations, is the costliest ever funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Penn, in collaboration with Abt Associates, a Cambridge, Massachusetts consulting firm, will be paid $12.5 million for their study, which focuses on nine cities, including Birmingham. Crawford’s work is part of a much more novel experiment funded at $1.9 million by the Community Services Administration, a National Citizens Monitoring Project to train neighborhood groups in forty-three cities to assess how city government spend community development money.

The Penn-Abt study may yet provide valuable basic research insights about the ultimate effect of certain kinds of federal aid on cities. But to date the Citizens Monitoring Project, even its small Birmingham component, has far more impact. It has not only dramatically revealed what actually is happening with funds in several dozen cities, but has also led to concrete changes at both the federal and local level. In Birmingham, for example, citizens’ evaluation provided information to revise the city’s plan, retargeting benefits to residents in the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

More important, the monitoring exercise gave local citizens the tools to find out for the first time what actually was happening in the program, and help empower them to act in their own behalf. It took the monitoring study for many poor Birmingham residents to discover that their own neighborhoods had purposefully been excluded from aid, while businessmen and homeowners in relatively affluent neighborhoods were being helped. Comparing law and regulations with how the money was being spent, the Birmingham poor learned that the program was not supposed to operate that way. They then proceeded to organize, so as to get some of the benefits for themselves.
In contrast to the dynamics in Birmingham, the Penn-Abt study has been mired in a series of controversies over its cost and research design, as well as in administrative, technical, and political difficulties. As a result, HUD has rejected and suppressed Penn’s interim report presenting its initial findings.

In an age of indecipherable red tape and often impenetrable government programs, evaluation raises the most fundamental questions of democratic process. How can citizens know what their government is doing? How is the public to judge the effectiveness of public policies? How can people participate in, and influence, the process? The issue is the ancient one of government accountability to its citizens.

Formal program evaluation is today a multimillion dollar industry, which occupies the attention of an increasing number of consulting firms, research institutes, and universities, as well as most domestic federal agencies. There is even a magazine, Evaluation, catering to those in the trade. Congress sometimes provides for outside scholars to review programs, and often earmarks one percent, or more, of program dollars for evaluation. The process of letting an evaluation contract is a well-established ritual. The agency issues a detailed Request for Proposals, “RFP,” soliciting bids from prospective contractors, and eventually selects one. The process of letting a large evaluation contract is modeled on government procurement of supplies.

These formalities aside, the politics of evaluation is subject to as much infighting and controversy as the programs themselves. Government officials are particularly sensitive about entrusting to scholars, supposedly outside their agency control, the politically explosive question of whether their program is having. The government often uses the RFP process to limit the scope of the evaluation at the outset. Search for truth may be a goal, but the intense competition for evaluation contracts often turns on which investigator is considered most likely to tell the government agency what it wants to hear. When studies don’t produce the desired conclusions, they are often rewritten or pigeonholed.

Community Development Block Grants are a good case in point. With a $4 billion annual budget, mostly divided by formula among the nation’s 500 largest cities, the program is a popular relatively no-strings approach to federal aid, and one likely to be stressed increasingly by the, Reagan administration. And it is typical of multibillion-dollar programs, in which the flow of federal dollars is hard to follow, and their impact difficult to measure.
As part of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, block grants were intended to help America’s troubled cities by removing slums and blight, and by assisting in neighborhood revitalization. Combined into this one block grant program were several older federal grant and loan programs for urban renewal, model cities, water and sewer facilities, public facilities, open space land, and housing rehabilitation. Cities were given broad discretion to use the block grant funds for a wide variety of programs ranging from acquisition of property, to construction or improvement of sewer lines, streets, and parks, housing rehabilitation, and even social services.

The programs own goals are ambiguous, partly because of its mixed parentage. Republican aims for the program stressed less federal control and greater local autonomy. These were modified somewhat in 1977 by the Carter administration and a Democratic Congress. The amended law and new regulations adopted by HUD Secretary Patricia Roberts Harris put a strong emphasis on citizen participation, and targeting of benefits to low and moderate income people.

How does one measure the success or failure, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness, of a program like Community Development? Does one measure success in terms of the Republican goal of more local autonomy or the Democratic goal of helping poor people? Maximum feasible help to the poor might best be achieved by repairing their dwellings and giving them jobs and social services. But the quickest success in revitalizing neighborhoods might come from encouraging “gentrification” and economic development, which aid the well-off, possibly at the expense of the poor. Does one focus on how well city officials have administered the program and how they spent the money, or does one try to measure the ultimate effect of the program on the life or death of cities?

These questions are, of course, highly political. They are regularly posed in a variety of forums by HUD itself, by congressional oversight activity, by Office of Management and Budget inspectors, and by the General Accounting Office. But the task of reviewing the new wave of revenue sharing and block grant programs is made more difficult by the ambiguous criteria and lack of data. In line with the aim of less federal control, cities have been required to submit only minimal information in their applications and reports to HUD, which reveal little about who got the money and how well it was, spent.

Some questions are harder to answer than others. It is easier to look at governmental process, the relationship between
federal, and city officials, than it is to trace who got the benefits. But it’s easier and far less expensive to study who got the benefits than to measure what good those benefits did.

The politics of Community Development Block Grant (CBDG) evaluation has revolved around which of these questions gets asked, and who is selected to find the answers. To date, the lion’s share of evaluation money, about $20 million, has gone to experts, compared to less than $2 million for citizen evaluation.

The first of HUD’s major evaluation contracts went to the Brookings Institution, which got $1.9 million for a six-year study focusing mainly on the allocation of funds among cities and the effectiveness of the Republican “New Federalism” theme of empowering local governments. The study was directed by Richard Nathan, a former official who was a principal architect of Nixon’s blockgrant strategy. Practicing the politics of evaluation, Republican officials simply picked an enthusiastic proponent of the approach to reassure them that it was working.

Most observers agree that the Brookings reports have served as a valuable introduction to the program. The limitation of the Brookings studies, however, is that they have mainly examined process, rather than substantive issues of whether the actual program is working and cities are in better shape. In the view of two participants in the Brookings study, the reports deliberately understated issues which would cast criticism on the program.

“The general style of the Brookings reports was to make no waves,” complains Victor Bach, a co-author of the third Brookings report, “probably because the data wasn’t good enough, but also because of a bias toward New Federalism and decentralization.” Bach, now a professor at the New School in New York, says Brookings downplayed such controversial issues as the failure to target funds to the people most in need, and failure of cities to encourage citizen participation in the program.

“The Brookings authors found things to excerpt from our monitoring reports that resonated with the themes they wanted to stress,” says MIT Professor Lawrence Susskind, one of the thirty-five academics hired by Brookings to monitor the program in sixty cities. “I think the Brookings study tells you what Dick Nathan and the other Brookings people wanted to find out that the New Federalism works,” Susskind added. (Paul Dommell, who succeeded Nathan as the director of the Brookings study, responds that Susskind’s study area, Boston, “is a case in itself,” and not typical of other cities.)
So politicized is expert evaluation that different branches of the same agency often commission rival studies. At HUD, the Assistant Secretary for Community Development, Robert Embry, was predictably annoyed when Donna Shalala, the Assistant Secretary In Charge of Research, ordered the Penn-Abt study without clearing it with Embry. Some of Embry’s colleagues at HUD were even more perturbed when the Citizens Monitoring Project was funded by another agency entirely.

Embry’s own studies included a $700,000 contract, with the Academy for Contemporary Problems to produce an “accomplishment survey.” The Academy is operated by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, and other associations of local officials. In effect, the HUD office in charge of block grants asked its most important constituents to report on their own accomplishments.

In contrast to the implicitly political functions of the expert studies, the political goals of the National Citizens Monitoring Project are quite frank: to maximize block grant benefits for minorities and the poor, and more importantly, to increase their roles in the program. The Project’s sponsoring groups, which include the National Urban League and the Center for Community Change, saw citizen evaluation as an opportunity both for fact-finding, and for pursuing an empowerment strategy for people in neighborhoods. In short, its mandate was not only research, but also advocacy and democracy.

The eight-person national staff of the Citizens Monitoring Project began by developing a very specific program to give local citizen groups the tools to evaluate Community Development. Monitoring forms were developed in detail, showing local citizens how to compare the actual performance of a city with its stated CDBG plans and with federal law and regulations.

The Project developed working relationships in the forty-three cities either directly with neighborhood groups, or indirectly with them through advocates such as Greater Birmingham Ministries. The three-person field staff then provided technical assistance to local people in carrying out evaluations.

For the citizens, tracking what happened to the Community Development Block Grant Fund in their city has been a matter of following dollars through a maze. Once money reaches the city, it is not clearly earmarked for a specific federal project the way it was in the old categorical programs such as urban renewal. The money is allocated to the different departments and
functions of local government and, in effect, disappears into the city budget. In these circumstances, it has been difficult to hold city officials accountable for meeting the national purposes of the law.

In Birmingham, for example, the vague documents that the city filed showed $11 million a year, but did not indicate specifically where the money was going. Citizens had no way of knowing for example, that a sizable chunk of funds was scheduled to build sidewalks and a pedestrian mall in “Five Points,” a middle class neighborhood in the south part of town near the university. On the records of the streets department, the two projects appeared to be just another routine paving job.

Only by carrying out, step-by-step, the “administrative performance case study,” designed by the National Citizens Monitoring Project, did Carolyn Crawford and her associates from the Greater Birmingham Ministries discover how the money actually was allocated. Through this process Crawford found that Birmingham’s thirty-one poorest neighborhoods had been written off as “without promise”- excluded from the “neighborhood strategy areas” in which CDBG funds were to be concentrated. Eventually, local neighborhood groups filed a detailed administrative complaint with HUD, which led federal officials to require a retargeting of funds to better serve poor and moderate-income people.

“We already had the commitment and dedication, but we didn’t have the information or technical skills,” said Benjamin Greene, a black electrician, who is president not only of his own Harriman Park Neighborhood Association, but of the 45-neighborhood coalition which emerged out of the “action monitoring” project. “The city said we didn’t have much potential in Harriman Park, but for those of us who live there, it’s home, and we think the neighborhood is salvageable.”

Green’s neighborhood group is seeking CDBG funds for a health clinic, a flood control project, and a safe walkway to the local elementary school, so children don’t have to walk through the mud or in the street. (The Penn-Abt research study suggests improvements won’t turn around the neighborhood. They will, however, make life safer and more pleasant for its residents.)

Residents of Birmingham’s Woodlawn neighborhood had a different complaint. Unbeknownst to them, they were included in a block grant target area. But they never were consulted or informed of the intended projects. As a result of the monitoring project, members of the Woodlawn Community Association learned that their CDBG funds were being spent on trees and shrubbery for a beautifi-
cation project. Now they are lobbying to have the money used instead to convert an abandoned school into a community center. At present, the area lacks any kind of facility in which to hold meetings, social gatherings, or indoor recreation activities.

The Citizens Monitoring Project contributed not only to HUD’s requiring revisions of the Birmingham plan, but to an organized citizen effort to have a voice in how those funds are spent. The local 45-neighborhood coalition, Neighborhood Services, Inc., is now doing its own planning, and seeks a formal role in helping direct the city’s future efforts. And a new mayor elected with the support of the neighborhood organizations is paying attention and implementing some of their requests. In many ways, the block grant program in Birmingham is now serving as a stimulus to grassroots democracy. Without the monitoring project this might not have happened.

Similar stories abound in other cities involved in the monitoring project. In Evansville, Indiana, Patchwork Central, an ecumenical activist church group, which served as the citizen monitor, discovered that more than $11,000 in CDBG housing rehab funds had been used to renovate the local CDBG office, at the same time that the applications of poor people were being turned down for lack of funds.

The Evansville experience also demonstrated that neighborhood advocacy groups and city officials don’t have to be implacable foes. Patchwork Central worked closely with a new mayor and planning director, Quentin Davis, who says: “They’re a responsible group and they produced information which changed some of my thinking.”

In Nashville, Tennessee, citizen monitors from Community Organizations for Progress discovered that CDBG funds were going to be used to build a truck bypass, which would have cut through a low-income residential neighborhood. Other funds had been scheduled for a commercial development of expensive boutiques. Both of these projects were stopped after citizen organizations convinced city officials that they did not meet the intent of the Community Development law and its regulations.

The housing rehabilitation project in Nashville was totally redesigned after the monitors also revealed that rehab funds weren’t going to those most in need, that grants were too small to help the poor, that applications were not being processed in a timely manner, and that workmanship was of poor quality. The neighborhood coalition won all of its demands for overhaul of this rehabilitation program.
In New York City, the $250 million a year CDBG program was monitored by the New York City Housing and Community Development Coalition. Among other findings the citizens discovered that a majority of the funds were being used, in effect, as general revenue sharing money to plug other holes in the city’s budget. For example the city was spending $6 to $7 million a year to repair potholes. The $32 million in housing rehabilitation was being spent without any effort to figure out whether recipients qualified as low or moderate-income people. Again, as a result of the monitoring effort, HUD required the city target benefits to needy neighborhoods.

In San Francisco, the local citizen monitors discovered that CDBG funds were slated for a luxury condominium and for a business and tourist project, both located in affluent neighbors. As a result of pressure from community groups following this revelation, HUD disallowed the projects and the city allocated money for a local community development corporation to build low-income housing. Partly as a result of the monitoring-advocacy effort, feuding ethnic groups have come together for the first time in a neighborhood coalition.

There is a need both for academic evaluations like the Penn-Abt study and for citizen monitoring. Some policy issues lend themselves to more rigorous research than citizen monitoring can provide. It is important to have disciplined studies measuring the impact of government programs. Ideally, such evaluation should explore not only whether a program is working, but whether it has unintended consequences, whether it is worth the money spent, and whether another solution seems indicated. Penn-Abt, for example, hoped to find out just how certain types of federal aid influence behavior. Does a home renovated with block grants stay fixed up? Does the owner stay in the neighborhood, or take the money and run? If he does move, who takes his place? What factors have the most effect on neighborhood improvements—fixing up a house, paving a street, and improving services?

Neither HUD nor Penn have officially released any of the study’s initial findings. But Professor Gale discussed parts of the study, which I had obtained, and pointed out tentative findings. Most significantly, he said, the study shows that most housing rehabilitation benefits went to the intended poor homeowners, who then stayed or else sold to people of similar means. In short, the effect was one of improving neighborhood stability for the poor rather than promoting gentrification, as some have suspected.

Gale found that benefits of housing rehabilitation outweigh costs that houses remain fixed, and valuable housing stock is saved. The evidence is mixed, however, on whether fixing one house has a
spillover effect encouraging neighbors to fix their homes. And the
evidence is quite weak that neighborhood improvements such as
paving streets or adding day care centers stimulate people to
repair their homes and upgrade the neighborhood.

These are not trivial or uninteresting findings, but the
Penn-Abt study, like many other academic evaluations, fails to
achieve the idealized objectives of evaluation as a significant
mechanism for government accountability. Its limitations are
virtually inherent in the constant tension between the needs and
interests of the academic researcher, whom understandably wants
to define a problem that’s “researchable,” and the needs of policy
makers and citizens who want practical guidance: Does it work?
Should we change it?

Penn-Abt doesn’t even address the essentially political
questions of whether the city is following legislative objectives, or
putting money into the “right” neighborhoods. Instead, the $12.5
million micro-research study focuses quite narrowly on housing
rehabilitation by homeowners, which is only one of eight major
activities pursued with Community Development Block Grant
money.

Another basic criticism of the Penn study is that such
micro-research is very expensive, and its conclusions at best quite
tentative. The fixing up of a house is only one tiny factor affect-
ing the behavior of people and the fate of a neighborhood.

“Sure, it’s a very small signal in the midst of a very large
picture,” acknowledges Gale, “but does that mean that we don’t
try to measure the impact of these programs, that we don’t try to
develop better evaluation procedures?”

The Penn-Abt study also suggests the potential technical
and administrative difficulties, which arise when universities and
consulting firms undertake social science research efforts of this
magnitude in partnership with a federal agency. HUD split the
functions of the project, paying Abt Associates $7.8 million to
gather the data, and Penn $4.6 million to analyze the results.
Unfortunately, the information that Abt was instructed to gather
didn’t match very well with the questions Penn was supposed to
answer. HUD buried Gale’s interim report, either because “its
results weren’t interesting” - the explanation given to me by one
HUD bureaucrat - or because “the work was sloppy and embarrass-
ing to us” the explanation of another HUD official.

The final report isn’t in yet; and by the time it comes in
new HUD officials will be in office, with very different orienta-
tions from those who commissioned the study. Like thousands of earlier reports, the Penn-Abt study is likely to gather dust.

In fulfilling the objective of an informed, active public, citizen monitoring has certain advantages over evaluations from consulting firms and universities. Citizen evaluation promotes democracy by making the intended beneficiaries of programs or taxpayers who will pay for them more competent, skillful, or capable of participating in the process. At the same time, it is often difficult to generalize findings made by citizen monitors in different cities.

Gale and the other principal CDBG evaluators naturally all find fault with the Citizens Monitoring Project’s bias and lack of rigorous scientific technique. Yet every evaluator whom I interviewed expressed a need for more first-hand monitoring observation, and less, reliance on regression analysis of masses of data. All agreed with the citizen monitors’ conclusion, that better information must be maintained so that people whether citizens or policy analysts actually can know what is happening. “It helps to have people understand what’s going on,” reflected former HUD Assistant Secretary Embry. “Very few cities have an inspector general or perform their own evaluation. Most mayors don’t have the slightest idea how CDBG funds are spent.”

The expert evaluators even those who disapprove of efforts by poor people to control the program also see the desirability of a more dynamic connection between evaluation and local accountability. “I can do the evaluation work more effectively, but I can’t raise the issues as effectively as the citizen groups can,” says Christopher Wye, the HUD official in charge of CDBG evaluation.

HUD is a very instructive vantage-point from which to assess the value of citizen monitoring. Though cities have wide latitude over how to spend block grant money, HUD ultimately referees whether the local outlays are consistent with the law. Without citizen monitoring, HUD hears mainly from mayors and developers and there is little to referee. With monitoring, citizens’ groups are given a ticket to play in the same arena with the other groups, and at a comparable level of sophistication for a change. By the same token, when congressional committees come around to conduct their evaluations of the program, they are pleasantly surprised to find articulate, competent local residents with detailed information to share explaining how the program works, on the ground.

After evaluating the CDBG evaluations, I must also conclude that the block grant approach of federal aid coupled with citizen monitoring is a better one for the 1980’s than the categorical ap-
proach of the 1960’s. The “Maximum Feasible Participation” requirements of the 1960’s had one serious flaw. By setting up poverty programs apart from city hall, they taught the poor how to make end runs around local government. Block grants, with citizen monitoring, teach the far more useful and enduring skill of how to influence local government. Programs can be more effective and more responsive to public needs if decision-making for carrying out broad national policies is placed at the local level. But the local democratic process must be open, with adequate information available to everyone. And if the political fight over increasingly scarce resources is to have any semblance of fairness, some special provisions must be made to help facilitate participation in the process by the poor. Efforts such as the National Citizens Monitoring Project serve this end.

Making government more accountable by citizen monitoring doesn’t have to be a function confined to the poor. If democracy is to flourish at the grassroots, if citizens are to feel less powerless to understand and control government bureaucracy, then everyone needs better methods to find out what government is doing as a means toward responsible, participatory citizenship.

An informed citizenry also can contribute to prolonged wrangles, to delays, and to far more politicized and not necessarily better decisions about how government money should be divided. Democracy is a messy, imperfect process. The alternative is a country in which the day-to-day government decisions which affect our lives are made by a faceless bureaucracy which too often is responsive to its own imperatives, rather than to the public.

Students Map Resources of Robeson County, NC
“Rural Roots,” Volume 2, No. 2, April 2001

The high school students of Robeson County, North Carolina know that their county is the state’s largest—and that it is only about ten percent smaller than the state of Rhode Island. That tremendous size hasn’t stopped them from setting out to create a series of special maps that document the ecological, cultural, historical, civic, and recreational resources of the area.

They are doing so with the help of the Rural Education Advancement Program (REAP) and the Center for Community Action, led by Mac Legerton, and the Green Map System. Two
maps have already been completed: Red Springs and Prospect. Within the next couple of years, the students hope to complete the more than 40 separate community maps it will take to chart the historical, cultural, and biological diversity of their entire county. Those individual maps—some of areas that have never been mapped before—will then be combined into one large, county-wide map for use by citizens, teachers, and visitors.

The Green Map Systems was founded by Modern World Design in 1995, sparked by positive public response to the Green Apple Map of NYC, the first Green Map that charted the green spots of New York City. The basis of the system involves the use of icons, or symbols, that identify and promote environmental resources, both natural and cultural, on locally produced maps. Most of the maps have been designed for cities, and plot such things as farmers markets, star-gazing sites, air pollution sources, and museums. Any group can create a map of any area, as long as no one else has already printed or planned a map of that area.

The Green Map of Robeson County is unique for many reasons, even by Green Map standards. It is one of the first Green Maps of a rural area, the first Green Map of North Carolina, and one of the few Green Maps in the world to include local historical and cultural sites along with environmental resources. Adding in historical and cultural sites was the idea of Mac Legerton, Program Director at The Center for Community Action. He felt that using the Green Map project in local schools would help to promote community, cultural, and self-identity in Robeson County, a county where curriculum materials focusing on local history and culture were scarce and ethnic diversity and tension high.

The Green Map project became a “crusade” rooted in one simple assertion: convince citizens to know why and how their community is unique, and they will take pride in their surroundings. High school senior Caroline Sumtter put it best: “The project is about letting people know that we’re [a community] rich in culture, and there’s a lot to offer here ... it’s just a matter of going out there and looking for it.”

The Process of Making a Green Map

Making the maps is a multi-step process, starting with choosing a geographic region, then dividing that region into separate neighborhoods. Next, a sample walk around the area helps to decide which resources should be the focus of investigations. For the students in Prospect and Red Springs, their lists of things to mark, such as oldest tree, churches, swamps, historical sites, voting locations,
and native plants, gave them a chance to ask elders in the community about their remembrances.

In a county that is the most ethnically diverse rural county in the U.S. (1990 Census), with representation from African, Native, Hispanic, and European Americans, there was much ground to cover. Students used local libraries and historical societies to confirm as much of the information as they could, and to research additional sites not mentioned by the elders.

The students then investigated the neighborhoods with cameras and notepads to describe the sites, and finished by placing the relevant numbers or icons on the base map. For the two maps done so far in Robeson County, students used numbers, rather than icons, to denote sites; soon locally developed student icons will replace most of the numbers.

Once completed, the individual maps will not only serve to create a countywide map with great value to the community and its visitors, but also as the basis for other publishing projects. The photographs will be made into postcards and T-shirts, and photos and useful information gathered by the students will be published as a book. A traveling “kiosk” of the map will be made, to trek from school to school, and the map will be available on the web, allowing students to display their work, provide a convenient platform from which to discuss their community, and carry the story to a wider audience.

The maps are also being integrated into all of the place-based education efforts going on in the Robeson County schools, as an interdisciplinary curriculum reform tool. The maps are not just a vehicle for students to learn about and become aware of the positive aspects of their communities, but they are also a means of building upon coursework already happening in multiple areas. Teachers have identified areas of study in history, culture, art, social studies, political science, and environmental science that will be changed in order to incorporate knowledge from the project.

Getting Noticed

The Green Map project has received extensive media coverage locally and regionally. Numerous articles have been published in the local newspaper, *The Robesonian*; an article was also recently written by the superintendent of schools in support of the project. This April, UNC-TV in Chapel Hill will be airing *Something in Common*, a film documentary featuring school-based projects in
North Carolina as models of diversity in action. The Green Map project figures prominently in the film, with extensive coverage of a summer training program for teachers.

As a remarkable result of all of this coverage, a local woman offered Center for Community Action five acres of land along the Lumber River at a dramatically reduced price upon learning of its projects. The organization plans to use the land as a local ecology center to promote the use and protection of the river and other resources of the region. The center will serve as a focal point for student Green Map efforts in the county, allowing them to explore the river watershed and participate in ecology-focused service learning opportunities.

Positive Feedback

“Making the map has provided opportunities for students to work together successfully across racial and ethnic lines in a community context,” said Legerton.

Learning about the positive aspects of their community has become increasingly important in Robeson County, a place that suffers from historical racial conflicts, negative stereotypes, and social and economic decline. “Place-based education has begun to heal the old wounds of racial conflict because adults and children alike are discovering that the positive attributes of their place are a result of its diversity,” said Elaine Salinas, a steward of the Rural Trust.

During the place-based professional development training given to teachers last summer, a quiz was distributed to teachers, asking questions like: “How many swamps are there in Robeson County-20, 30, 40 or 50?” and “What is one species of fish commonly found in the Lumber River?” Legerton says that the quiz led to teachers confessing their general ignorance of the resources of the county, and pledging to find more ways to integrate local knowledge into their courses.” One teacher was quoted in The Robesonian: “This workshop has shown that Robeson County does have a lot to offer. I had no idea.” Even teachers not part of the project have seen renewed engagement of students in the learning process, and have expressed interest in utilizing the approaches in their daily curriculum.

Patricia Locklear, Projects Coordinator at Center for Community Action, also expressed astonishment at how little she knew until she began working on the Green Map project. “I’ve learned so much about the two communities in which maps have already been completed—areas that I don’t live in. It is amazing what you can
find going through records and speaking with some of the town’s citizens."

More than just a Map

As each map is made, the number of converts to the side of community pride increases. “It’s a very interesting, enlightening, and educational experience,” said student Caroline Sumtter after she completed the Red Springs map. She and her mapping partner, Hannah Sin, found an Indian burial ground among their sites, and enjoyed walking through the Flora McDonald Garden (named for the Scottish Jacobite heroine who fled Scotland for North Carolina after the Culloden massacre in 1746). “I had been there lots of times before, but [had] never learned about it until now,” she said.

“People in my town refer to [our town] as ‘Dead Springs,,,,” said Sumtter with frustration in her voice. She is hoping that the completion of the Green Map will help citizens of her community value their surroundings and keep people from leaving the county. She is going to college in the fall to study hotel-restaurant management and hopes to bring those skills back to her town in order to open a bed and breakfast, and perhaps a restaurant, in a historical home. Be sure to look her business up when you’re in town in the coming years ... it’ll be on the Robeson County Green Map.

For a copy of the completed maps or a progress update, contact Patricia Locklear, Center for Community Action, (910) 739-7851, PO Box 723, Lumberton, NC 28359.

Why Do We Work The Way We Do? What Difference Does It Make?

Excerpted from “Grassroots Participatory Research: A Working Report from a Gathering of Practitioners” compiled by Lee Williams, Ph.D. with the Community Partnership Center, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, November, 1997

The following are notes from an open discussion among activist researchers involved in eleven community-based participatory research projects throughout the U.S. They represent a broad array of experience including community organizers, popular educators, students, secretaries, administrators, factory workers, laborers, teachers, and others. The comments are arranged accord-
ing to themes that emerged during the discussion:

1. To Provide Hope and Care
2. To Produce Better Knowledge and Information
3. To Promote Effective Action and Change
4. To Affect Power, Power Relations and Empowerment

To Provide Hope

**Betsy** - For us one of the most important parts of doing participatory research was becoming role models for the homeless women we interviewed giving them hope during crises and letting them know we were also homeless once. They had the chance to see and hear how we got out of that situation and I think it helped to give them hope. Also having someone actually care about their experiences and listen to them was somewhat therapeutic for them to relieve all that stress … in the long run what we were able to do in some way was to give them hope to keep on with their struggle and know that over time something good might happen we were living proof. So I would say for me that is the most important part of doing participatory research.

**Catherine** - Since I came into our project a little later and in a different way than the others, I would like to talk some about my own reasons for wanting to do this kind of work in the way we are trying to do it. I came into this project as a participant in one of the focus groups and then became more deeply involved as a result of that. During the focus group it was a really good feeling to not only hear the other experiences, really hear these stories, but also to participate and tell my story and experiences to people who were also willing to listen and work to try to do something about it. It was very powerful for me. So much so that I wanted to become a part of this project and help others to experience the same feelings.

**Dora** - I think my feeling about why I work the way I do, or at least the best way I can translate it is that of caring or nurturing. Sometimes, more than anything, what we can do in the creative process is to let that process grow, to nurture the seed. I want to be uplifting but at the same time standing next to. In a lot of my work I count on that feeling; in Spanish we call it con carino. In translation it means the act of being there with love for the creation in order to sustain the individual to grow. I think that is kind of how we need to feel that we are there for those we work with. That we have a philosophy that guides us that is based on care and regard for the individual person.
To Produce Better Knowledge and Information

*Delores* - For us some of the advantages of doing participatory research are first seen in designing the survey. Our homeless experiences allowed us to know what kinds of questions to ask. Questions that they would know how to respond to. So we had some advantages doing the survey. Another example is that while actually doing the interviews we had a certain rapport with the women we were interviewing, having gone through similar experiences of being homeless. It made most of the women very comfortable to talk to us because they did not feel that we were like outsiders coming in trying to get information out of them. We explained to them that the information we were gathering would be used not necessarily to better their situation, because we hoped they would have a home by then, but to make the experiences of shelters better for the next group of women. So I think that the advantages will be seen in our data analysis of the information that we have gotten. Once again, having been homeless we may be able to interpret that information. Sometimes there may be things said that if you haven’t been through that situation you are not going to know what is meant. But having been homeless ourselves, I think that gives us an advantage to produce better and more useful information on the homeless experience for women.

*Dick* - I started working as a journalist for a number of years and found that in interviewing people that knowledge was really important when it came to asking good questions. But it seemed even more important to have when listening to the answers. So I see the process as equipping people with needs with the ability to ask the right questions to get a handle on their situations. I think that is a really powerful tool for anyone or group to have. To me knowledge is a very powerful tool. Knowledge is power, and I think that by working in a participatory way that we are providing the tools to communities to help them to do their own community development and to allow them to start asking the questions and creating some knowledge to deal with their situations. Once they analyze their situation based on their own experience and know where they are at as a part of that analysis; that’s when folks can finally begin to make some difference in their own lives and situations. That’s how I am feeling about why I work this way.

*Michael* - It seems to me, or for me, that research suggests that there is this reality out there. If we work on these facts you know, this fact-finding research that we will do this activity as research and we will go to where these facts are and bring them out somehow and put them somewhere, and that is not actually my experi-
ence of learning to research. But when I saw in your preparatory notes leading up to this gathering the research that you put in parentheses (production of knowledge) that made sense to me that I could understand. What it seems like we are talking about is getting knowledge in common, working in common to get knowledge, and that this research is really common knowledge. In other words what I want to do is make common knowledge because it’s a better type of knowledge than we produce the other way.

**Linda** – I guess I actually started my career by connecting to women. Women didn’t have the things they needed, the support networks. I was also a worker, and workers are another group that has very little control. So now I connected women and workers and finally worked with women workers around health issues. Then I ended up going to school and afterward began working with unions. So we got a request from a union and they wanted information on workers health and workplace hazards. So we had these lengthy discussions about what it was we wanted to do getting something valid enough that it would be some kind of science and also trying to get some kind of information out to the community to use for their own health and also for future contract negotiations.

Finally, we ended up using a participatory research strategy to guide our work. By beginning from the workers’ own experiences in the workplace and helping them to do their own information gathering and analysis proved a very effective strategy on a number of counts. We actually put our knowledge into action in terms of changing things about workers’ health and their control over it in the workplace. We got lots of information that we couldn’t and wouldn’t have gotten any other way, and we did some very good science. Plus, it was really fascinating work, to see how people actually started to explain what they were talking about and why it was important to them. So, as a university-based person, working like this provides good science and, as someone who works to make changes in workers’ health, participatory research provides effective information upon which to base action.

**Richard** – Well, I started this at the university in 1967 and got a Bachelors Degree and along the way I worked in all kinds of different things and finally went on to graduate school. I spent the whole of a class about research methods staring out the window listening to all these devious ways of getting information from people, distracting them or whatever, and getting data through these devious means. I just thought to myself there has got to be another way to get information and I knew I wanted to find something different than that. What I found was this thing we keep calling participatory research and it seems to me that it is the best way to go about getting good
information that can be useful to produce knowledge and action and help to do something about the injustices that exist at all sorts of levels.

Larry – I also work this way because the knowledge produced using people’s experience is better knowledge. Besides Yellow Creek, another example up home is a lake. This lake was built as a park and a memorial to a former governor of Kentucky, Burton T. Combs. So they called the lake the Burt T. Combs Memorial Lake. Before they started digging our new lake, all the local people started talking about it and all, and the people said that a lake wasn’t going to last. The coal owners will strip-mine the mountains all the way around the lake and the local folks said, “You just wait and see; all the silt is going to come down and fill in the lake.” So the state scientists and engineers said, “We have taken that into account. We know what the runoff is. We know what the rainfall is. So we know it will work and what we are going to do is put a lake here.” Sure enough it wasn’t but a couple of years and they started having public hearings about what to do with our filled-in lake. “What are we going to do? Trees are starting to grow on it, etc. Are we going to make a golf course or a softball diamond?” The lake became land just like the local residents tried to tell the scientists, engineers, and politicians. Because of that the local residents always called it Lake Mistake. In fact nobody knows what the real name of it is anymore, it’s just known as Lake Mistake. The moral of the story is they did not value local knowledge and experience. The experts totally threw it out the window, but could have saved millions of dollars and lots of time and energy in the process if they would have only listened to what the “non-experts” said, who were really the “real experts” in the situation. Better knowledge would have been produced for everyone concerned. And maybe today we would really have a lake!

John -

I have done this work a long time myself and I thought I would hone in a couple of things. One, this work is about power. I just believe that in this day and time that the roles of who controls and produces knowledge and not just schools, but in communities is so important. There is a rich body of knowledge that is lost and not used when we do science the old-fashioned way. We get misinformation. We know that this is done. Work based on people who are experiencing the problems and are producing the answers is so much better information. So we have got to find ways for people who are experiencing the problems to put out the facts and produce knowledge. So it is about empowering people to produce their own knowledge.
Second, as we have gone around the room the last couple of days, people have said I do this work, “not really scientifically.” Well, I want to do my work this way, because it is better knowledge than what the scientists produce, and I think that we don’t give up the fight and put down what we are doing by saying it is not really scientific. Like the RWARM folks have said, if you have the experience of the people you are working with and you did a survey it should be a lot better than someone who would just construct a survey based on a literature review. So I do this not just because it deals with power and empowering powerless people to produce knowledge, but because the answers that we come up with this way are a lot better for us and our world than this other way of science. Completely! We have scientists constantly say people aren’t getting sick in Love Canal. Why? Because their science is wrong. And it was only when people there or those in Yellow Creek combined their experiences with their tools of research that action emerged. So I am pretty passionate when I argue at the university or anywhere of why I do this. I do my work this way because it produces better knowledge ... it is a damn better way to do it.

To Promote Effective Action and Change

Rocco – If I were to draw a line about what kinds of things I am interested in, it is in comprehensive community redevelopment because I love the community and want it to be a nice place to live. I am really involved with the project through the community and the University of Illinois as a community entity. What keeps me going is looking at it and realizing that, as relating to participatory research, that it is an effective way to accomplish what needs to be done. It seems to serve all sides of the issue. It is a way to learn, a way to teach, a way to make change. It is a better way to get the job done that needs to be done.

Tim - Well I think Rocco said it pretty well. You do it because it is the right thing to do and you look at it and it makes sense. It is a better way to work, produces better information that can be used to make better, more authentic changes in our institutions and the way they work.

Maria - For me the connection between participatory research to action is what makes the difference. Some of it is organizing, some might be globalizing, some might be education, but all are steps toward enhancing the capacity to think and move people toward change. For example, I think about this work in terms of workers detailing what the factory does in terms of the ability to organize around the information. The work is fact finding, it involves community or lay people, not professionals. PR is a tool and it trans-
forms and enhances people’s capacities to think and to change the status quo. That is why I work this way because it helps to make change for the revolution.

**Larry** – First of all I do this work because I want a revolution. I think that the only way to get to the revolution is to create a better understanding about why we need a revolution. That means we have to have some information to work with about conditions and possibilities-about how to work differently to do things differently. And I am talking about a revolution that changes the structure so the capitalists don’t own the system and that grassroots folks have some control. So as long as we keep trying to work at that concept we can’t help but work in a way that includes participation and a way for people to act to change their own worlds. Doing participatory research offers those kinds of possibilities to people, to work for an active democracy and to make changes in their own communities, and to experience and get the kinds of knowledge about how the system works and develop ways to change it. That’s why I do my work this way.

**To Affect Power, Power Relations, and Empowerment**

**Marie** – I am a community planner and I work in community development. I think that the reason I do this work is from a very strong conviction that community development depends on the development of people. The products are important but they are not sufficient for community development. For real community development to happen it means that a group of people have increased their capacity, to control their own reality - that a group of people can become more confident, cooperative, courageous. All these “c” words. But that is why I do this work, to help develop people’s capacities.

**Brenda** - Well, I guess for me the reasons for being involved in this kind of work and this whole project is that it gave me the opportunity to work with people who run the structures and set it up so that they took away my power. If I have the opportunity to do some good, help some other women who face this situation to have it better, I am going to do that. We gave these women a place to have voices and the opportunity to say this is wrong. Maybe this will make a difference for them individually and certainly we hope that it makes a difference in how homeless women are treated in shelters and by society. So for me doing this project is a way to help readjust the power relations between homeless women and the people and institutions that work with them.
Lynn - I developed affordable housing with grassroots and women’s groups before I became involved with RWARM. I was discouraged with how long it took to develop each project due to lack of funding and political will. I realized that I needed to be involved with advocacy work. At the same time, I found the most rewarding aspect of my work was helping to strengthen grassroots organizations. RWARM was an opportunity to advocacy based on grassroots leadership. When I became involved with RWARM, it included women who had experienced homelessness, but the project wasn’t led by them. It evolved into a participatory action research project I now see so many advantages to this approach. The RWARM Researchers are in college and will be professionals who can influence others about women’s homelessness.

Randy - I guess my main reason for doing my work this way is that I have never liked it when other people “do” things “to” me, especially without asking. So for me sort of the real importance in working this way is to make a knowledge democracy based on participation. In a sense the arrows go every direction from each of those two things to all the others. If you pull any one of those out the other two don’t work any more. And so that is it for me anyway.

Fran - I thought one thing that it might be interesting to say about motivation in doing this work is that I can both admit and celebrate the fact that I do this work for survival. I do it to help make social changes and to empower others to make change, but I also do it for my mental health, pleasure for my own head. I know I need to be hopeful, feel empowered, and be into the work myself if I expect others to participate and for us to try and change anything. It is also a lot more fun than working any other way.
Glossary

A

Academic: Of or relating to a scholarly institution

Accountability: Responsible; required to account for one's conduct

Action Plan: A sequence of steps describing what will be done, by whom, and when, to move the research process forward.

Action Research: The systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of making change; also called applied research.

Accurate: Careful; precise; lacking errors

Advocacy: Plead for; defend

Analysis: The process of bringing order to information organizing it into patterns, categories, or basic descriptive units.

Assessment: To estimate the size or quality of

Assumption: Something taken for granted or accepted as true without proof

B

Basic Research: Any systematic collection and analysis of information conducted to obtain knowledge about a subject for its own sake; See Applied Research or Action Research

Bias: A distortion of research results by neglected or undeclared factors; predisposition or prejudice

C

Capacity: Ability to produce or receive and use knowledge or information

Cause: A person or thing that produces a result or consequence

Change: Making or becoming different; alterations or modifications

Collaborate: Working jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavor
**Common Knowledge**: Information widely accepted as true

**Community**: A network of people who share common interests and are connected to one another through continual interaction

**Conclusion**: Judgment, decision, or opinion formed after investigation or thought

**Consensus**: General agreement or opinion

**Consultant**: Person providing professional advice

**Criteria**: Principal or standard that a thing is being judged by

**Critical Consciousness**: See “Reflective Knowledge”

**Data**: Facts or information about a particular situation, issue or problem; information collected through any or a variety of research methods

**Deliberate**: To estimate the weight or force of arguments, or the probable consequences of a measure, in order to make a choice or decision

**Democracy**: A government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections

**Development**: The act, process, or result of bringing something to an active, visible or mature state

**Dialogue**: Conversation carried out with the objective to arrive at better understanding between participants rather than agreement, decision, or solution

**Discover**: Find out; become aware

**Disprove**: Demonstrate something is false; refute

**Empowerment**: The ability to do or act

**Epistemology**: The theory or science that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge

**Evaluation**: Assessment, appraisal
**Experiment:** Procedure for testing a hypothesis

**Expert:** Person having special knowledge or skills

**Expertise:** Special skills, knowledge, or judgement

**Fact:** Thing that is known to have occurred, to exist, or be true

**Fact-Finding:** Trying to determine the realities of a case, situation, or relationship

**Facilitator:** A person who guides group discussion

**Findings:** Conclusions reached through inquiry

**Focus Group:** A group with predetermined characteristics that meets to discuss a particular problem or issue

**Follow-up:** Make further investigation

**Generalize:** To infer a general law or principle from a particular instance; to take information obtained through research and apply it to a broader subject or population

**Geographical Information System (GIS):** Computerized system utilizing precise locational data for mapping, navigation, etc.

**Hypothesis:** Proposition made as a basis for reasoning, without the assumption of its truth

**Implement:** To put a decision or plan into effect

**Information:** Something told; knowledge acquired in any manner

**Institutional:** Having the nature of a social, educational or religious organization

**Interview:** A meeting of people face-to-face to confer about something
**Interpret:** To explain the meaning of

**Issue:** A point, matter or question to be disputed or decided

**K**

**Knowledge:** The fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association

**L**

**Legitimacy:** Justification; authorization

**Literature review:** Assessment of written works and printed matter

**M**

**Measure:** To determine size or quantity

**Method:** A regular procedure or way of teaching, investigating etc.

**Methodology:** An operational framework, design or plan with specified rules and control that govern the research process

**Monitor:** Maintain close observation

**N**

**Normative:** Establishing a standard pattern or type

**Norm:** A pattern or trait taken to be typical in the behavior of a social group

**O**

**Objective:** External to or independent of the mind

**Observation:** Accurate watching, and noting of phenomena as they occur in nature with regard to cause and effect and mutual relations

**Opinion:** Unproven belief or assessment

**Outcome:** Results; visible effects, behavioral changes
**P**

**Participate:** Partake; engage in; become associated with

**Participatory Evaluation:** Process of self-assessment, collective knowledge production, and cooperative action in which the stakeholders in a development intervention participate substantively in the identification of the evaluation issues, the design of the evaluation, the collection and analysis of the data, and the action taken as a result of the evaluation findings

**Participatory Research:** A collective endeavor in which people come together to solve a common problem through investigation and, in the process, engage in activities requiring that they interact with and get to know each other

**Perspective:** Mental view of the relative importance of things

**Problem:** Doubtful or difficult matter requiring a solution

**Procedure:** Series of actions conducted in a certain order or manner

**Process:** Course of action, especially as a series of stages

**Prove:** Demonstrate the truth of by evidence or argument

**Public:** People as a whole; something open to or shared by all

**Q**

**Quantitative Research:** The systematic collection and analysis of information using methods allowing for the measurement of variables resulting in numerical data subjected to statistical analysis

**Qualitative Research:** The systematic collection and analysis of information using methods such as participant observation or case studies which result in a narrative, descriptive account of a setting or practice

**Qualitative Methods:** Procedures such as participant observation or case studies, which result in a narrative, descriptive account of a setting or practice

**Questionnaire:** Written series of questions especially for statistical study
Rational: Of or based on reason; sensible; sane

Recommendation: Advise; counsel

Reflection: Consideration; contemplation

Reflective Knowledge: Facts pertaining to the realm of human values in which questions of right and wrong, good and bad, are raised

Regression Analysis: A measure of association between two quantitative variables

Relational Knowledge: Understanding we have of others as human beings and partners in relationships

Reliable: Dependable; consistent character or quality

Representational Knowledge: Facts based on observations; requires a degree of detachment on the part of the server-knower

Research: The systematic collection and analysis of information (See “Outcome”)

Research Design: An overall plan of how to go about generating answers to questions

Research Methods: Procedure used to collect and analyze information; a strategy of inquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to research design and data collection

Result: Consequences; issue or outcome of something

Revolution: Any fundamental change or reverse of condition

Rigorous: Exact; strict; scrupulously accurate

Scan: Quickly consider; look closely; scrutinize

Science: The systematic observation of natural events and conditions in order to discover facts about them and to formulate laws and principles based on these facts

Scientific Technique: Method of carrying out research activities in a manner that is highly systematic and accurate
Social: Of or having to do with human beings living together as a group in a situation requiring that they have dealings with one another

Social Structure: Social patterns in which an observable uniformity takes place

Solution: Act or means of solving a problem or difficulty

Solve: Answer or effectively deal with

Strategy: Plan of action

Study: The act or process of applying the mind in order to acquire knowledge; the product of such activity

Symptom: Sign of the existence of something

Systematic: Methodical; according to a system

Task Force: A temporary grouping under one leader for the purpose of accomplishing a definite objective

Target Audience: A specific group of people being addressed or affected

Valid: Sound or defensible

Values: One’s principles or standards; one’s judgement of what is important in life