

Working with Rural Communities

Participatory Action Research in Kenya

2nd Edition

Edited by

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Preface

This book arose out of my concern with the lack of involvement of rural people in Kenya in the conception, planning, implementation and evaluation of development programmes. Prof. Roberta Mutiso, then a colleague at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Nairobi greatly helped me with the conceptual issues relating to the first edition of the book.

The concern took me through a rather long road that ended in a research project whose results formed a major part of the first edition of this book.

Mr. Alan Fowler, at that time the Programme Officer at the Ford Foundation in Nairobi, took a personal interest in the proposed research project. Where my ideas were still vague, extended discussions with Mr. Fowler concretised the ideas and I was able to refine the proposal to a researchable study. Through Fowler, I was able to obtain some of the literature on participatory research and establish contact with institutions that were carrying out similar research in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

I adopted the term "Participatory Action Research"(PAR) as the title of the research project for the simple reason that at the time, I was not sure whether the terms "participatory" and "action" were distinct in meaning, whether they meant the same thing, or if each one of them, as far as research was concerned, embraced the other. Backed by my background in social science research methods, I was eager to find out how "participatory" research and "action" research differed from each other and from the conventional quantitative and qualitative research methods in the social sciences, especially sociology.

One of the activities of the PAR project was the holding of a seminar to discuss the findings from the study. The first edition of this book was therefore the product of the dissemination workshop held at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre and attended by university researchers and their then current and former students.

The theme of the seminar was "Participation of People in Rural Development". One underlying assumption of the seminar was that people are a key resource, and if developed, they can facilitate other forms of development in their communities. The other assumption was that social science researchers have a role to play in mobilising and involving people in rural development work, and in doing so, document the experiences emanating from the process. For this to happen, universities cannot afford to remain isolated, but rather, they have to take a proactive part in the process through Participatory-Action Research.

The seminar discussions were broadened to include several research papers around the seminar theme, especially when viewed from the social science research perspective. As a result, a number of papers were presented; these could broadly be treated as either theoretical or empirical.

However, while PAR was the concern of the first edition of this book, it was conceived from the context of rural communities that continue to suffer severe problems of poverty, insecurity, lack of infrastructure and services and general underdevelopment, especially from the point of view of human development.

This revised edition while acknowledging the initial concern with PAR, departs slightly by tilting the focus toward rural communities which are the social laboratories for rural development efforts. A main question of concern, and which underlies the preparation of this edition is: how an understanding of rural communities can be enhanced so that the community serves as the effective basis for their own development.

My sincere thanks go to the Ford Foundation Offices in Nairobi and to Mr. A. Fowler in particular, for providing a grant and for encouraging me to carry out this undertaking, from which I have learnt a lot about the plight of rural Kenyans. Our most sincere thanks go to Prof. Philip Mbithi, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, who pioneered this research on community participation and under whose tutelage, many of the contributors to this book studied.

I acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the people of Kabras and Mwingi areas where the initial studies were undertaken, and also those of other areas where subsequent studies that are reported in this second edition, were carried out. Through their openness and willingness to provide information and to participate in other ways, they have affirmed my belief that the people of this country have an enormous capacity for self-development if only they were given the chance. To them, and to thousands of others like them throughout Kenya, I dedicate this second edition of the book.

Orieko P. Chitere
Nairobi,
May, 2010

Part I

The main concern of the revised edition of this book is that of creating understanding of and around rural communities with a view to using the information gathered about them as a basis for speeding up their development.

Chapter 1 examines various definitions and conceptions of the terms “society” and “rural community” and brings out the widespread problem of a lack of understanding of rural communities, this is a major issue in this revised edition. One of the means to development is people’s participation in activities meant to better their lives. **Chapter 2** explains the concept participation, its various aspects as well as its achievements and limitations. **Chapter 3** extends the discussion on participation by focusing on participatory action research.

In **Chapter 4**, a detailed discussion of decentralised planning, which is one of the main mechanisms for involving communities in the identification of their problems, planning and taking actions is presented. The strengths and limitations of this type of planning are dealt with. **Chapter 5** follows up the discussion on decentralised planning by providing some reflections on one of its aspects “devolution” which has been adopted by Kenya’s new Constitution. **Chapter 6** departs slightly from the theme of earlier chapters; it examines the role universities can play in rural development.

The six chapters provide a broad conceptual framework that is critical for effectively understanding rural communities as well as for discussion and reflection on the various aspects and development experiences presented in Parts II and III of this revised edition.
