

# ACTION RESEARCH

## TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*Evanthe Schurink*

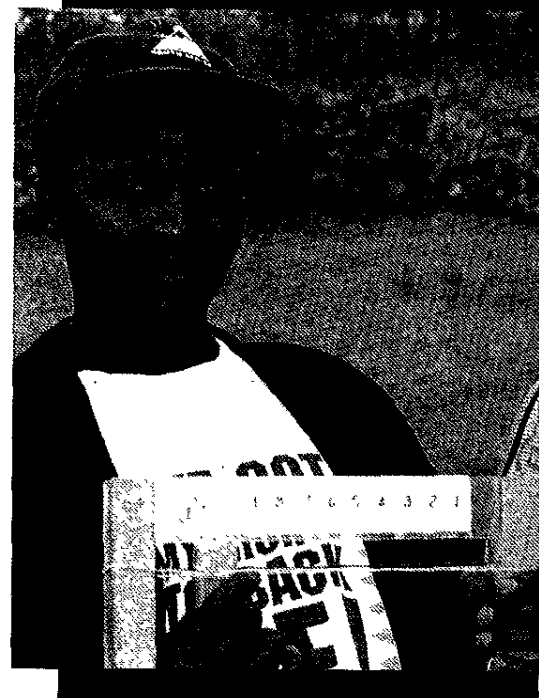
### HOW PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH DEVELOPED

**The actual research takes second place to the emerging processes of collaboration, mobilisation, empowerment, self-realisation and the establishment of community solidarity.**

he earliest traces of the participatory action approach were found in the efforts of colonialists to develop and encourage self-help among indigenous communities. Despite these efforts to 'involve' indigenous communities, social planning and development in South Africa were characterised by an elitist process that dispensed resources and services in accordance with the wishes of the most powerful. The needs and ideas of communities, especially those of the poor, were largely ignored by researchers and policy-makers. This often resulted in disruptive changes in these communities and failure in social development efforts.

Even when communities were consulted, community development was done from the narrow perspective of experts who approached communities with their own ideas of what the community needed. Stakeholders in the community were mostly viewed as sources of information. Research (both qualitative and quantitative) was thus a one-way process where the expert would collect the data, analyse and interpret it and make recommendations on paper as to how the needs of the community should be addressed. These

The Schutte Scale: useful for community self-surveys



## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH CONTINUED

**Reality could thus only be discovered when researchers actively involve their research subjects in the research, turning them into research participants.**

**In this sense participatory action research goes further than merely revealing an understanding of the life worlds of research subjects; it interrelates understanding and action by enabling communities to take action after they have gained knowledge of their situation. In addition, participatory action research builds human capacity.**

**The ultimate result is self-esteem, self-reliance and self-determination.**

recommendations were rarely followed up by any concrete action in the community. If action was taken, communities were expected to commit themselves to development efforts in which they had no real part and of which they had no ownership. Community development in South African communities thus often failed. Millions of Rands were spent on building structures and developing programmes that were never used by community members and thus became white elephants.

Today there is growing consensus in South Africa that no sustainable development can take place without involving communities in planning the type of services they need. South Africans who have for so long been denied the opportunity of choosing for themselves, now, especially after the election of a democratic government, insist that they become part of decision-making processes on a national, provincial and local level. Various world summits and conferences, including those on Children, Environment, Population, Social Development and Women, outline what appears to be a growing consensus that sustainable human development depends mainly on what people in their families and their communities do for themselves.

### RESEARCH AS EMPOWERMENT

**R**esearchers are no longer perceived by communities as having the right to exercise a monopoly on explaining the social world. Instead, they are seen as having the duty to empower research participants to understand their own situation and to take control of it through collective action for self-development. Sustainable development in South Africa can thus only take place through people's mobilisation towards self-development. It could never take place if the state or some outsider (researcher) takes the primary responsibility for initiating and implementing development.

South African researchers have

come to realise that they have to undertake action research within a new paradigm that commits them to a process, not of developing communities but of sharing their expertise and experience with research participants in those communities. And that they must make available the information, skills and resources needed for people's self-development.

Although people's participation today has become a major concern in sustainable development thinking in South Africa, motives for utilising community development may still not be pure. Rising costs and financial strains often force governments to adopt a participatory approach in the hope that informal networks in the community will effect the desired community development. This approach to action research will result in failure for any community development effort, no matter how participatory the process or pure the intentions of the researcher are.



### **CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

**P**articipatory action research is recognised in the literature as an alternative system of knowledge production based on the subjects' involvement in decisions regarding the questions to be asked, who the respondents will be, how the questions will be asked, what role the subjects will play in data gathering, how the data should be interpreted, the development of models and programmes and the evaluation of development efforts. Participatory action research makes use of both qualitative and quantitative research designs, data-gathering and analysis. However, the actual research takes second place to the emerging processes of collaboration, mobilisation, empowerment, self-realisation and the establishment of community solidarity.

### **RESEARCH AS THE DISCOVERY OF MEANING**

**F**rom a review of articles in the *Community Development Journal*, the renewed

strength of the participatory approach is clearly evident. Although participatory action research does not yet have a consolidated theoretical position, it has developed a distinctive ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the relationship of the researcher to reality), methodology and specific concepts on which a conceptual framework could be built. Although quantitative methods (surveys, community profiles and structured interviews) may be used, participatory action research is based on the anti-positivist (qualitative) worldview that there is no outside 'true' reality which could be discovered by researchers in an objective, detached way. Reality could only be understood by discovering the meanings that people in a specific setting attach to it. In contrast to the positivist researcher who sees "the researcher as subject within a world of separate objects" (cf. Reason 1994:9), the qualitative researcher asserts that the researcher is inherently part of the world being studied. Reality could thus only be discovered when researchers actively involve their research subjects in the research, turning them into research participants. In this sense participatory action research goes further than merely revealing an understanding of the life worlds of research subjects; it interrelates understanding and action by enabling communities to take action after they have gained knowledge of their situation. In addition, participatory action research builds human capacity. The ultimate result is self-esteem, self-reliance and self-determination.

### **FACILITATING CIRCUMSTANCES**

**A**ccording to the literature (see Levi & Litwin 1986), a set of facilitating circumstances should exist before participatory action research could be undertaken. These include the following:

- The admission of failure of a prior system or programme

---

**Researchers are no longer perceived by communities as having the right to exercise a monopoly on explaining the social world. Instead, they are seen as having the duty to empower research participants to understand their own situation and to take control of it through collective action for self-development. Sustainable development in South Africa can thus only take place through people's mobilisation towards self-development.**

---

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH CONTINUED

- Consensus on the need for change
- An accepted multi-disciplinary, shared conceptual framework which could be used to develop a new paradigm
- Support from government, business and communities
- A culture of human rights

## FEATURES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

**A**ccording to Whyte, Greenwood and Lazes (1991), Lammerink (1994) and Rahman (1993), participatory action research has the following features:

- The process of change is based on the principle of self-development. Outsiders cannot develop the research participants. The people have to organise themselves. The researcher can only act as a catalyst for change or as a change agent in the empowerment of research participants.
- The research is not undertaken for the sake of accumulating knowledge or to satisfy the researcher, but to initiate a process of collective reflection and self-conscientisation. This encourages individuals in a group to share and discuss their experiences, perceptions and thoughts. It mobilises collectives to take action that would lead to social transformation, reconstruction and sustainable development.
- The epistemological premises conform to those of pragmatism and dialectical materialism, two schools of scientific research. Research should thus be value-(ideology)directed and purposive, that is: Research should be aimed at practical problem-solving and

# UHLOBO LOCWANINGO (Lapho Kubambiseni Khona Labo Abenza Ucwaningo Nalabo Ucwaningo Olwenziwa Kubona) LUSETSHENZISELWA INTUTHUKO

*Evanthe Schurink*

*Zulu Translation: B Nhlapo (Uuisa) (012) 429-8290*

**L**ohlobo locwaningo lwasungulwe abaphuma kwamanye amazwe ngenhloso yokukhuthaza ukuzenzela kulabo bantu bomdabu. Noma kunjalo, imizamo yokuthuthukisa umphakathi ayizange iphumelele noma yayidala isixakaxaka ngenxa yokuthi izidingo nemibono yalevomiphakathi ibinganakiwe. Namhlanje kunesivumelwano sokuthi imiphakathi kufanele ibe neqhaza ekuthathweni izinqumo, nokuthi intuthuko incike kakhulu emizamweni yabantu nemindeni ukuzenzela izinto ngokwabo.

Abacwaningi abasabonwa njengalabo abanelungelo lokuchaza indlela abantu bephila ngayo emhlabeni. Umsebenzi wabacwaningi ukupha labo abacwaningwayo amandla nelungelo lukuzwisisa indlela yabo yokuphila, nokuthi umphakathi wonke uzibambeke iqhaza ekuqhubeni intuthuko yabo. Ayikho enye indlela intuthuko engaqhubeka ngayo. Ngaleyo ndlela, abacwaningi base Ningizimu Afrika bazwisisa ukuthi akuwona umsebenzi wabo ukuthuthukisa imiphakathi, kodwa kumele basebenzise ulwazi lwabo ukusiza labo ucwaningo olwenziwa kubona nemiphakathi yabo, lokhu bakwenza ngoku phana ngolwazi, ubungeweti nalokho okudingwa yimiphakathi ukuze bazithuthukise.

Lendlela yokwenza ucwaningo, yindlela ehlukile yokugaya ulwazi. Lendlela igxile kakhulu ekusebenzisaneni kwalowo ucwaningo olwenziwa kuyena, ezintweni ezinje ngemibuzo ezosetshenziswa, wobani abazophendula leyo mibuzo, izobuzwa kanjani leyo mibuzo, qhaza lini elizobanjwa yilabo abaphendulayo ekuqogweni kweinformashini, nokuthi le informashini izohlaziywa kanjani. Puthi nokuthi amaprogramu entuthuko azohlaziywa kanjani. Ucwaningo lona luthatha isibili kulezi zinto ezibalulekile. Ukusebenzisana, Umvivo (Ukuhlanganisa amabutho), Ukunika amandla, Ukuzibonela izinto nokuqaliswa kobuqokatha bomphakathi, Imiphumela esemqoka

improvement in the quality of life of the research participants.

- The starting-point of the research should be the mobilisation of the internal group resources such as values, culture, skills, knowledge and experiences.
- The environment in which the research process takes place

should be supportive and encourage all stakeholders dealing with a specific issue (e.g. street children) to participate actively and to become involved in decision-making. Decision-making should therefore be an uncomplicated process so that community members will be able to participate in

kuba ukuzazi, Ukuzethemba nokwethemba ikhona lakho lowenza okuthile.

Ngaphambi kokuba lindlela yocwaningo ingaqaliswa, kumele kube khona ukwamukela kokuthi izindlela ezindala zokwenza ucwaningo zehlulekile; ukuvumelana ngokudingeka koshintsho; umqolo oyinhlanganisela wemibono nemicabango, ukusekelwa uhulumeni, amabhizinisi nemiphakathi; nesiko loBuntu.

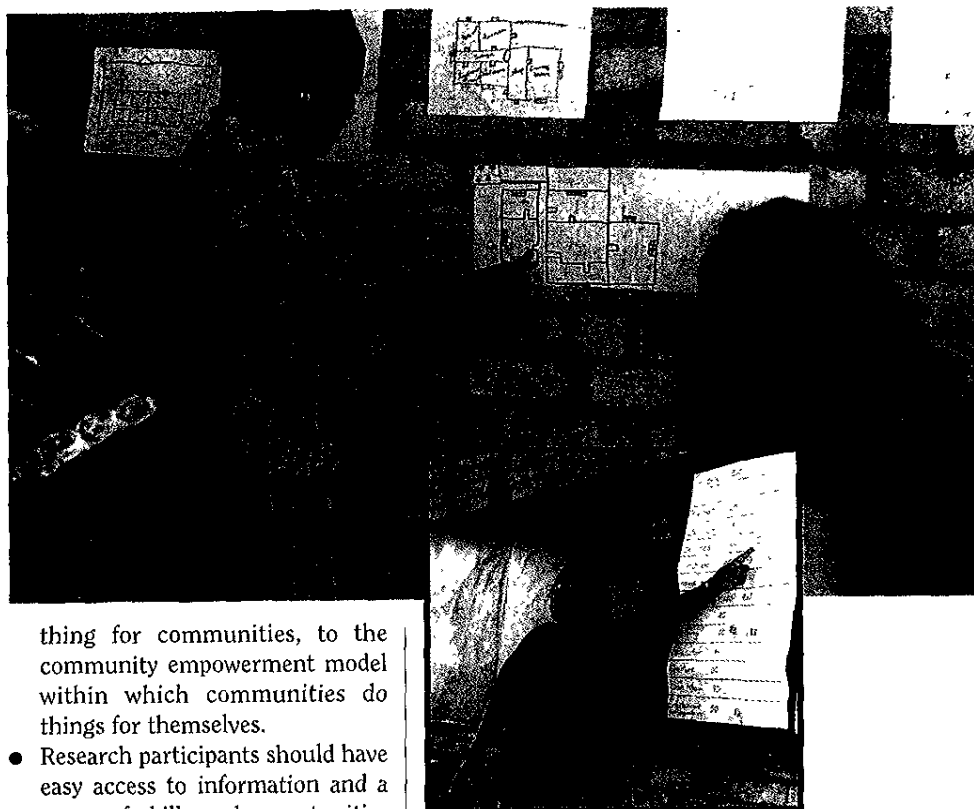
Ukuqaliswa kocwaningo kumele ukuthi zonke izinto zeqembu langaphakathi, ezinje nge: Amagugu, isimo sempucuko, ubucwepheshe, ulwazi, zonke lezi zihlanganisela ndawonye. Kufanele kube khona ukwethembana nokuhloniphana phakathi kwaba bamba iqhaza. Abacwaningi bazoba abaqhubi, abafundi, abakhimagembu ukwenza izinto zibelula, kunokuba babe yizingcweti eziphethe iprojekthi.

Kulindlela yokwenza ucwaningo kumele kubekhona imihlangano nomphakathi njalo ukuze kubonisanwe ngezinkinga, kuhlenganiswe abantu, ukusakaza imiphumela nokuthi kubukezwe zonke izibambo zocwaningo.

Kucwaningo olwenziwa eIvory Park olwalumayelana nokugwema ubugebengu, kwasungulwa lindlela elandelayo: Abacwaningi abasebenza ngokuzinikela ekuthuthukiseni umphakathi, bazama ngakho konke ukugqugquzela ukusebenzisana nomphakathi ngokusebenzisa ama-Workshop. Amalunga omphakathi azoqeqeshwa njengabathungathi bolwazi. Yonke infomashini etholakalayo izohlaziywa, nezinyathelo zokusiza umphakathi zizohlaziywa ngaso sonke isikhathi. Abahlanganyeli bagqugquzelwa ukuthi bahlaziye inqubo bebonke, nokuthi bathathe izinyathelo zokuzakhela uzungu lokuzixazululela izinkinga zangomuso. Indlela eyinhlanganisela izosetshenziswa lapho abahlanganyeli bezogqugquzelwa ukuthi basebenzisane nosobhizinisi, noHulumeni. Iforamu yomphakathi yamaphoyisa iqinisiwe ukuze isetshenziswe njengenye yezinhlangano zenhlanganisela yoshintsho nentuthuko.

or to sustain the project.

- An atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between role-players should be created by the researcher.
- A shift should take place from the dependency model within which researchers (from their superior knowledge perspective) do every-



thing for communities, to the community empowerment model within which communities do things for themselves.

- Research participants should have easy access to information and a range of skills and opportunities to stimulate participation, self-awareness, self-respect, ownership, a sense of purpose and the development of a new way of thinking and behaving that would enhance their self-reliance.
- The objective way of studying communities and treating respondents should be changed to a participatory approach where people are regarded as equal partners in the research process.
- Because the world is so complex, no single methodology or data-gathering technique can provide the full picture. Participatory action research should therefore include both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and various data-gathering methods (focus group interviews, questionnaires, participant observation).
- Projects should be inclusive, based on intersectoral and multi-disciplinary principles. For example, projects should involve all the appropriate government sectors on a national, provincial and local level, institutions in civil society (e.g. churches and schools), non-government organisations (NGOs)

**South African researchers have come to realise that they have to undertake action research within a new paradigm that commits them to a process not of developing communities but of sharing their expertise and experience with research participants in those communities and making available the information, skills and resources needed for people's self-development.**

delivering social services, the business sector together with community members and the different professions such as social workers, nurses, and educationists.

- Researchers have to act as facilitators, co-learners and team-builders, rather than as experts in charge of a project, and should constantly interact with research participants to discuss and verify findings.
- During their active involvement

in the struggle of the other role-players to solve their social problems, researcher-practitioners (e.g. social workers, psychologists, doctors) should be open to new information and ideas that could elicit paradigm shifts and enhance the development of social theory and practice.

### **THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

**T**he process of participatory action research is not clearly spelt out in the literature. According to Reason (1994:329), it is easier to discover the ideology of "enlightenment and awakening of common people" behind the process of participatory action research than to unravel the process itself.

#### **Regular meetings and critical reflection**

However, from personal experience, it is clear that regular community meetings are an important mechanism to identify problems, mobilise people, disseminate findings, reflect on the progress of the project and develop the ability of the community to become self-reliant. Furthermore, as participatory action research pursues action and research at the same time, it has a cyclic path that allows for critical reflection at each stage of the process.

From field experience in crime prevention research in Ivory Park, the following approach was developed:

- A committed community change agent (researcher) would start an intersectoral process of community mobilisation, utilising available structures to enable community participation by means of workshops. Regular meetings would be held to ensure participation of leaders identified during the workshops.
- Community members would be trained as fieldworkers to ensure community participation in the fieldwork process. Feedback at the community workshops sensitised

participants to the crime situation and encouraged them to form their own action-taking structures. After the data analysis phase was completed, the findings of the research would be disseminated and workshopped. An action plan (to address the problems) would then be developed by community members in co-operation with the change agent. The action plan would be periodically evaluated and adapted by community members in co-operation with the change agent.

- Participants would be encouraged to review their progress collectively and to formulate a future course of action based on the positive and negative outcomes of their participatory action research. During workshops, community members would be encouraged to analyse their problems collectively, and then decide what action to take to address these problems.
- Throughout the research process, community members would be encouraged to reflect critically on the research findings and to take action based on the endorsed findings. An intersectoral approach would be followed and the Community Police Forum would be strengthened and utilised as an intersectoral structure for change and development. Community members would be encouraged to liaise with the business sector and local government.

One of the valuable lessons was that participatory action research enhances self-awareness and knowledge. It therefore has great potential for empowering people to develop and execute their own action plans and systematically review and evaluate their own progress.

*For list of sources and more information, contact:*

*Evanthe Schurink at (012) 302-2740*

