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Participatory methods in the analysis of poverty: a critical review

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This paper reviews and analyses the literature on participatory methods in poverty analysis. The popularity of participatory poverty assessments has greatly increased in the last decade, and a growing number of development agents is adopting some form of participatory methodology. This spread however seems to be possible even without a shared understanding of what participation stands for. This paper starts by introducing the broad lines of the debate on participation, before focusing more specifically on participatory methods in poverty analysis. After having discussed the tools as well as the insights they provide, some recent evidence comparing participatory and non-participatory methods is presented. Such literature allow to highlight both the strengths and the weaknesses of participatory assessments, as well as opening the way for new approaches integrating elements of both. In the last analysis, however, the challenge to the non-extractive nature of the methodology, posed by the transposition of participatory techniques from the project context in which they were developed to the policy one, remains serious and poses questions on what “listening to the voices of the poor” means.

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Introduction

This paper reviews and analyses the literature on participatory methods in the analysis of poverty: how they have emerged, how they have been adopted in this context and the challenges they pose. Recent years have witnessed a great interest in these methods as instruments for poverty analysis, and the insights which they have provided on the experience of poverty have contributed to the establishment of a mainstream multidimensional definition of poverty. The example of the WDR 2000 on poverty and of the background research undertaken for its preparation shows how much the “voices of the poor” have helped legitimising such a new definition.

While in the process of adoption and mainstreaming, participatory methods have lost the link they had with the debate about the concept of participation and its political value, the methods have not emerged in a vacuum. Their development arises from, and feeds into, the way “participation” opposed as well as became part of mainstream development discourses. We will therefore start this brief review by discussing the concept of participation, its contested meanings and the broad lines which characterise its evolution. We will turn to a more focused discussion of participatory methods, highlighting how they have been adopted in poverty analysis, which tools have been used and the insights they provide, as well as the results of recent comparative research. Participatory methods have not been immune to criticisms and we will review the main ones, some of which addressed by integrating elements of standard survey techniques with participatory methods. A final section will conclude and draw on the previous ones to identify key trends and challenges in the use of participatory methods for poverty analysis.

Before proceeding, a short warning is needed. Some might object to “participatory methods in poverty analysis” as a useful analytical category, as the methods are just methods and what is of interest is the framework in which they are used and the methodology which underlies them. In other words, we might be accused of having chosen an angle at once too specific and too heterogeneous. We found however that this label was useful to delimit the area we wanted to explore, without directly involving an in depth exploration of all the other uses and contexts in which participatory methods have been adopted. It also has the added advantage of making clear that the practical fieldwork which this paper is intended to inform will be hard challenged to go beyond a practical application of participatory methods in poverty analysis, and that indeed if it managed to do just that successfully, it would succeed in one of its aims.

1. Meanings revisited: the concept of participation.¹

Three big shifts seem to have characterised the debate on participation. In the 1970’s “popular participation” was seen as an important component of rural development and basic needs strategies, and as such figured in the programmatic statements of many international agencies. In the 1980’s it became associated with discourses of grassroots self-reliance and self-help, with NGOs often having to fill in the void left by a retreating state as a consequence of neoliberal reforms. The 1990’s saw participation being advocated on a larger scale, being moved beyond the boundaries of project or grassroots interventions to other spheres of social, economic and political life. Participation came then to be seen as a tool towards important policy objectives such as “empowerment” and “good governance”, while maintaining, at least in theory, a role as an end in itself.

A recent and very comprehensive review of the concept of participation (Cornwall 2000) however highlights how this reading in terms of “shifts” hides a number of conflicting views which shaped the way participation has been redefined over time, as well as elements of continuity. Three main “tributaries” to the

¹ This section draws greatly and, hopefully not too grossly, on Cornwall (2000), simplifying some of the arguments as they make a necessary backdrop to our subsequent discussion. It is to the original comprehensive and authoritative source that the interested reader is referred for a more in depth discussion of the concept of participation.

conceptualisation of participation are identified, and their influence traced throughout its evolution: discourses of participation based on self determination, those based on efficiency, and those emphasising mutual learning. These three ways of thinking respectively reflect views on participation as a process *by* the people to whom development project and programs are aimed, or *for* the people (with a development agency taking the initiative and often limiting participation to consultation) or *with* the people.²

These different tributaries of participation coexisted, and as participation was translated from the programmatic declarations of the 1970's to practice in the 1980's, these different views were clearly reflected in the *modus operandi* of different agents in their projects. Mainstream development agents like the World Bank designed projects where participation was translated into identifying beneficiaries whose consensus had to be sought by sharing information, and whose resources could be tapped to make the project more efficient. At the same time, many self-development organisations, especially in the South, took up the challenge of developing people's self awareness and agency through a variety of tools, ranging from visuals to theatre. Interestingly, neo-liberal reforms and the rolling back of the state, together with donors efforts to support NGOs activities in filling the void in the provision of goods and services, had as byproducts the partial convergence of different actors' way of operating, as well as the placement of participation more firmly into mainstream development rhetoric.

This process of mainstreaming was not integral, however. The political emphasis on power relations at the heart of the concept of "empowerment" was lost in the transposition from the periphery to the centre, and participation became compatible with the overarching market oriented economic paradigm. At the same time, as some concept of participation (though not necessarily one on which there was a shared understanding) become central, new ways of fostering participation and of engaging in participatory processes were sought. Developments in the techniques which grassroots organisations used as rapid assessment devices in the communities they were working with seemed to provide the answer, as their data gathering nature appeared also to be able to start processes of engagement of community members.

Participatory methods developed in the context of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) became therefore the central tool for development agencies to embrace participation. While we will look into the methods more carefully in the next section, it is worth concluding this one by pointing out that a difference in understandings of participation and different agendas by different actors continued, so that even the adoption of similar methods could not bridge these gaps.³

² More formal analyses of difference within different models of participation have been put forward in various typologies of participation, each pointing to different "axes" of difference characterising alternative models of participation. Arnsteins's (1971) considers a "ladder of participation" graduated by the extent to which citizens have control over decision-making. Pretty (1995) considers instead the different uses for which a development agency can initiate participatory processes. White (1996) considers a more complex set of criteria to categorise participation, including what it means to different agents and what is it for.

³ Arguably, however, the adoption of participatory methods set in motion other processes, creating new spaces for dialogue and participation and transforming behaviours and attitudes of various kinds of actors in unexpected ways. Cornwall(2000) provides a range of examples in this respect.

2. Ideas and tools: from PRA to Participatory Poverty Assessments.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been defined as “a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers 1994, a). It emerged in the early 1990’s building on the insights and methodological innovations arising from a variety of other sources, including: “activist participatory research” with its use of “dialogue and participatory research to enhance people’s awareness and confidence” (*ibid.* p. 954); agroecosystem analysis contributing a series of tools such as diagramming, mapping, scoring and ranking of different actions; the insights provided by the work of applied and development anthropologists, and those of field research in farming systems, emphasising farmers’ capabilities of conducting their own analysis; and most notably the developments of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA).

RRA had already taken in insights and methods from these other sources, and provided a quick way of gathering information on local realities building from local people’s insights. RRA questioned the urban biases implicit in outsiders’ role as development consultants (the so-called “development tourism”) by giving a more significant role to local knowledge, nonetheless still elicited for analysis by outsiders. Further, RRA challenged the way knowledge was generated, and responded to the challenges of “hard science” (McGee 1997) by stressing the two key principles of “ ‘optimum ignorance’ (find out as much as you need to know now) and ‘appropriate imprecision’ (there is no need to know everything exactly)” (Cornwall 2000, para 4.1). RRA also opened the door to methodological experimentation, appearing in different forms, among which Participatory RRA emerged (*ibid.*) later developing into PRA.

The core difference between RRA and PRA is not only in the extent to which local people are included in the research, but in their ultimate purpose. “A PRA is intended to enable local people to conduct their own analysis, and often to plan and take action” (Chambers, 1994 a). By becoming a way in which participation was enacted, the qualitative and often visual tools used in PRA acquired a new and distinctive characteristic. In practice, however, the extent to which these tools effectively brought about participation in all the phases of the project cycle has been questioned leading to many criticisms from those who sought a radical change in the way development efforts were conducted.

Without dwelling here on the pros and cons of PRA and the way it was implemented, it is important to stress here that the flexibility of the methods meant that it was possible to use them within alternative methodologies. Often in practice, therefore, it was their cost effectiveness and the timeliness with which they produced results, rather than their empowering effects, which underpinned the support they were given.⁴

If the widespread adoption of participatory techniques challenged the extent to which their distinguishing features were maintained in practice, a further challenge was posed by the “scaling up” of PRA from project planning to input into policy making. The most evident form in which this scaling up has taken place has been the Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) performed by the World Bank, introduced as complement to Poverty Assessments in the face of criticisms of their exclusive money metric focus. These PPAs have spread rapidly. By 1998 half of the completed poverty assessments performed by the World Bank included a participatory component, Robb (1999). The process of relying on participatory tools for setting policy priorities has recently been pushed even further by the extensive participatory study “Voices of the poor”, commissioned as background work for the WDR 2000/2001, which because of its scale (it involved in fact 23 countries) needed to face new issues of standardisation of the methodology.

These new developments, which indeed are not the same, but might be seen as arising from the way the World Bank is interpreting participatory techniques, have proved controversial. They have been described as ways in which the participatory research agenda has been coopted for instrumental ends by new converts

⁴ It is worth noting, however, that this view (McGee 1997) might err somewhat in its optimism on the spread of acceptancy of PRA as a “serious” source of hard evidence on poverty. The alternative, i.e. the widespread adoption of PRA as an expensive window dressing exercise, cannot be entirely ruled out at least in some instances.

(Mc Gee 1997), while the extent to which the consultations (“rapid consultative exercises that deploy a range of qualitative methods to gather people’s view” (Cornwall 2000)) have been participatory has been questioned.

The challenges implicit in this type of scaling up had already been foreseen by those advocating PPAs. In the words of a document which proved very influential in setting PPAs in the World Bank research agenda “the scope for, and nature of, participation changes in character when applied in circumstances beyond that of an individual project. [...] The challenge in developing methods for participatory poverty assessment involves the adaptation of these “listening devices” to enable local level experiences, perceptions and analyses to speak to the national debate on poverty and social policy” (Norton and Francis (1992), p. 9).

By delinking participatory techniques from the direct involvement with community projects and planning, the road was open for more extractive uses of the PPAs. And indeed the emphasis was initially in providing information which could provide information for better policies. A new generation of PPAs, however, seems now to have taken up the challenge of “influencing the policy process” (Cornwall 2000). “A wider spectrum of actors have been drawn into these processes, which place as much emphasis on the impact of their learning on their agency within the policy processes as on the information that is produced” (*ibid.* para 5.2.2).

Also this last decade of rapid expansion in the reach of the language and the tools of participation we find, therefore, the conflicts which characterised earlier decades. The dichotomy between an efficiency and a right based argument for participation still remains, as does the debate on how deep the commitment shown to participation as a legitimate end by those who proclaim it is. It is hard to foresee which of these different points of view will become stronger in the future and with which consequences. Rather than launching into speculation, however, we will now turn our attention to the methods adopted by PPAs.

3. The methodology of Participatory Poverty Assessments.

From the methodological point of view, PPAs can be classified as contextual methods of analysis (Booth et al. 1998) i.e. data collection methods which (taking a poverty related definition) “attempt to understand poverty dimensions within the social, cultural, economic and political environment of a locality” or of a group of people (*ibid.* p. 52), by privileging local people’s perceptions. Though different research methods can be contextual to different degrees, this categorisation juxtaposes participatory methods with methods which aim to standardise data collection and analysis, as for example in large household surveys. This way of classifying approaches offers the advantage of breaking away from the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy which is generally seen as characterising the comparison of survey and participatory data, but which does not consider the potential of obtaining quantitative information from PPAs (through rankings for example; other ways of quantifying information are more debatable as discussed below).

Participatory approaches, however, are not only contextual, they also emphasise poor people’s creativity and ability to investigate and analyse their own reality, (Chambers 1994, a). So, they try not only to understand reality at the local level, but they do so through local people’s own analysis. For a researcher this involves not only adopting a set of different tools, but also completely different behaviours and attitudes. By recognising their role as outsiders, researchers need to redefine themselves as facilitators who have to share in local knowledge and be willing to review their own values and perceptions critically. These behavioural elements are central to the success and truthfulness of the exercise, though they are also among the most difficult to standardise and to verify *ex post*, when looking at existing research.

One important challenge to participatory poverty assessments is that the non-extractive nature of the exercise and the efforts not to raise expectations that cannot be met is not easy to reconcile with the policy focus of the poverty assessment, when those policies are remote from the local level.

3.1. The tools

A variety of tools are used in PRA. A classification into visualised analysis, interviewing and sampling, and group and team dynamic methods has been suggested (Cornwall, et al (1993) quoted by Estrella et al. (1998)). Examples include: participatory mapping and modelling (people are asked for example to make maps or three dimensional representations of their social, demographic, health environment), time lines and trend and change analysis (describing changes in land uses, changes in cropping patterns, chronologies of events relevant to local life), seasonal calendars (describing seasonal variations in activities, diet, labour, expenditure, debts ...), wealth and well-being grouping and rankings (by categorising households or individuals the poorest are identified by locally perceived well-being indicators, often as a byproduct a wealth of information on livelihood strategies, assets, access to factors of production is gathered).

The variety of these methods and their flexibility distinguishes them from other methods which elicit self-perception data through structured questionnaires (as for example in identifying the minimum level of income necessary for the poverty line, e.g. Pradhan et al 1998). As these tools are often adopted in a sequence, the assessment can be tailored so as to fit the context and the issues to be analysed appropriately. Further, different tools are used in order to triangulate (i.e. validating through cross-checking) the results which might allow different insights to emerge.

In performing a PPA, care is needed to choose tools and sequences which are well suited to capture the core elements of deprivation in the specific context and the specific aspects of interest in the assessment. This might imply, for example, adopting different sequences for urban and rural contexts.

As an example of the variety of issues which might be investigated in a PPA in Table 1 we present a description of the issues and methods considered in the World Bank's Zambian PPA in rural areas.

Looking through the table two main features stand out: one is the variety of issues discussed, the other is the number of methods suggested for treating every issue. The detailed breakdown of issues shows that different issues can be dealt with jointly or sequentially, which reinforces the importance of careful planning of the sequences to be adopted, not least to avoid repetition which would be time wasting as well as boring for the participants. It is also clear that, though a PPA is meant to inform policies, not all types of poverty related research would be equally concerned with discussing policy-options, especially if the research is unlikely to have a direct bearing on the options available. It could therefore raise expectations which cannot be fulfilled.

Table 1. Issues and methods in the PPA in Zambia (rural areas)

ISSUES	METHODS
Perceptions and indicators of wealth, well being, poverty Vulnerability, powerlessness, local terminologies and their correspondence with such ideas. Differences in perceptions by gender	Wealth/Well-being grouping, for criteria and indicators Social mapping Semi-structured mapping
Perceptions of change over time in welfare, indicators, terms of trade	Time-line (for migration, rural terms of trade, environment, etc.) Income and expenditure patterns trend analysis
Access to services (and usage of services) such as health, education and credit. Preferences –especially where choice between option is possible. Perceptions of services, including views (or awareness) of recent change. Again, different perceptions and values for men and women.	Institutional diagramming Semi-structured interviews Trend analysis of services – e.g. health, education, agricultural extension, marketing
Seasonal stress: food security, health, general livelihoods	Seasonal calendar (health, food security, food intake, access to fuel, water, etc.). Comparative seasonal calendars, good years, bad years, average years
Assets of rural communities (access to services, common property resources, other natural resources)	Resource mapping Focus group discussion Institutional diagramming (Venn/Chapati diagram)
Assets of rural households	Wealth ranking/grouping Livelihood analysis
Coping strategies in times of crisis	Livelihood analysis Semi-structured interviews Ranking exercises
Perceptions of consumption levels in terms of food, clothing, and relation to wellbeing	Wellbeing grouping/rankings on expenditure outlets, social mapping Semi-structured interviews
Community based support mechanisms for the rural poor (community “safety nets”)	Institutional mapping Semi-structured interviews
Long term environmental trends, for example, declining soil fertility, declining rainfall	Historical transects Community time lines Resource mapping at different points in time Trend analysis
Role of community institutions in service/infrastructure provision	Institutional mapping Semi-structured interviews

Source: deGraft Agyarko (1997) in IDS(1998)

3.2. The analysis

The final phase of a participatory poverty assessment is the analysis of the outputs, and feeding back the results to the community as well as to other final users, in the case of PPAs those involved in poverty reduction strategies. This last stage entails making sense of all the outputs produced by different groups on

different media to arrive at an assessment. Ideally it should be local people themselves who synthesise the results, but this is not necessarily the case. It is more common that field reports are given back to the community and scrutinised by them. As already discussed, new generations of PPAs are trying to make this “final phase” the beginning of a process of change in the community and in the way they participate into the policy process, going well beyond the production of one snapshot of poverty at a given point in time.

Understanding how the results are arrived at should be helped by the fact that participatory approaches include the documentation of all the stages of the process. In fact, the documentation of the process might help in understanding features like the interpretation given to quantitative outputs (ordinal or cardinal), or the role played by different groups (whether all have been given the same exercise, whether different people have been asked to synthesise outputs produced by others etc. ...).

Arguably, documenting the process is rather ineffective as a mechanism to ensure quality – scrupulous and committed researchers will perform and document a process characterised by attentive questioning of their own assumptions, while others will perform all these tasks as steps in a recipe, without the critical awareness which characterises good processes. Further, not unlike the case of long methodological annexes in monetary poverty assessments, it is unlikely that the readers will have much time or expertise to delve into the procedural details, so that the key findings as highlighted by the researchers are the ones which are going to have an impact.

Important challenges to how truly participatory the process is arise in this final phase – the conversion of local reality as analysed by poor people into final reports. And the problems which arise seem to be hard to face even when following best practices. Inevitably, every assessment is done for some purpose, and that purpose is likely to be reflected in the elements which are highlighted. And even the more committed and soul searching of the researchers adopts some criteria to understand the reality she is faced with in order to make sense of its complexity.

A recent analysis of the findings of the first wave of PPA in Africa found that “certain themes were noted [in the PPAs] that have not been highlighted in the main overviews of PPA results. However, what is perhaps more striking is what is missing even from this expanded list. There are a range of other issues for poverty analysis that seem important *a priori* but that are notably absent in the majority of cases. There are several possible ways of explaining the particular pattern of emphases and absences in the first round PPAs.” (Booth et al 1998, p. 67). They cite “obvious” selectivity at various levels due for example to “pressures on writers of country synthesis reports to highlight findings that have immediacy for policy makers” (ibid.) or the indirect influence of the strategic policy framework adopted by the World Bank on the way themes are organised.

It is hard to see how PPAs can get away from those kind of constraints, which represent both a natural need of the researchers to refer to some known context and a logical consequence of doing analysis for a particular purpose. Before concluding this section, it is worth noting as an aside that the passage quoted above raises an important foundational point: can a truly participatory approach deal with *a priori* held beliefs? Should it, and if so how much? To give a practical example, should a researcher prompt local people to discuss an issue which they have not mentioned on the basis of some prior held belief that the issue is of importance?

4. Main Findings

Some important insights have emerged from participatory assessments of poverty describing a pattern going beyond the specific context in which they have been undertaken. These include the findings that assessments of well-being are multidimensional, that individuals have complex coping strategies and their priorities reflect

values, preferences and time horizons which are highly context specific and strongly influenced by social institutions.

Despite the high degree of contextualisation of the findings, general patterns emerge from participatory assessments. A report for the study “Voices of the poor” summarised the findings from the poverty assessments from 23 countries describing people’s perceptions of wellbeing and illbeing in terms of five dimensions (Narayan et al 1999): *material wellbeing*: “lack of food, shelter, clothing, poor housing and uncertain livelihood sources” and in some countries also “having enough to eat all year round ... possession of assets”; *physical wellbeing*: “mainly described in terms of health, strength and appearance”, seen as both important in themselves and as a preconditions for work; *security*: “peace of mind and confidence in survival ... not just in terms of livelihoods, but also in terms of sheer survival in the face of rising corruption, crime, violence, lack of protection from the police and absence of recourse to justice, wars between ethnic groups, tribes and clans, frequency of natural disasters and uncertainties of season and climate”; *freedom of choice and action*: “it means the power to avoid the exploitation, the rudeness and otherwise humiliating treatment so often meted out towards the poor by the rich or the more powerful in society. It also includes the ability to acquire skills, education, loans, information, services and resources; to live in “good places”; to withstand sudden and seasonal stresses and shocks and not slip further into poverty”; *social wellbeing*: “defined as good relations within the family and the community”.

The identification of these dimensions is of interest because it shows that it is possible to extrapolate some general patterns across national studies of poverty. At the same time, other frameworks could have been adopted to summarise the findings, therefore giving a different emphasis to the findings. One of the final reports of the same study mentioned above, for example, chose to discuss the results in terms of 10 different themes, which were recognised to be “not necessarily universal” (Narayan et al. 2000, p. 18).⁵ This indeed raises the issue, discussed in the previous section, of how much this convenient and convincing framework for presenting results truly “emerges” from the analysis – which is not meant to be a criticism of this specific study, but rather of the whole idea that any interpretation of reality might emerge spontaneously. Having focused attention on the processes by which knowledge is produced, participatory techniques (or at least a certain use of participatory techniques in which local people themselves are not involved in framing the results) cannot now eschew the same scrutiny which it advocates for other sources of knowledge.

It should also be noted that others have tried to build on the insights of PPAs to create analytical frameworks. One such example is the asset framework (Booth et al 1998), built on a conceptual reorganisation of the findings of the first PPAs on Africa, as well as of other contextually-derived evidence. This framework is based on “the key proposition ... that the notion of capital is a powerful entry point for causal explanations of poverty. Capital is understood in a broad sense as any “stock” which is capable of being stored, accumulated, exchanged or depleted, and which be put to work to generate a “flow” of income or other benefits” (*ibid.* p. 68). An extremely interesting feature of such an approach is that it can be potentially applied to integrate insights from contextual and non-contextual methods.

5. Comparing poverty assessments

The spread of PPAs and the challenges which they pose to other methods, especially monetary poverty assessments, has meant that quite a lot of attention has been drawn to exploring the differences between methods. Clearly, adopting a broader point of view than the one adopted in monetary assessments leads to a more complex view of poverty. Discrepancies between different types of assessments are often noted – there is a “trade-off among some poor groups between income and other sources of self-respect” (Shaffer

⁵ The themes chosen were: wellbeing and illbeing: the good and the bad life; the struggle for adequate and secure livelihoods; the places and the physical conditions in which the poor live and work; bodily illbeing; gender relations; social illbeing; anxiety, fear and insecurities; the character of institutions; governance; powerlessness.

1996, p.33). For example, in a participatory assessment conducted in Armenia, single pensioners were consistently ranked as the poorest in their communities, though their levels of income were not such as to justify it. What the participatory assessment highlighted was rather their sense of isolation within the community itself (Robb 1999).

Even more telling is the comparison of the apparent divergence between the Ugandan PPA (UPPAP) and household surveys' (UNHS) finding (McGee(2000)). The first, highlighted poor people's perception of a deterioration in their wellbeing, while the latter shows a trend of rising consumption per capita over four subsequent years. Apart from the wider set of concerns which are captured by the PPA, and the different time spans to which data refer (with participatory methods recovering information on past decades and household surveys providing a series of snapshots in the 1990s), other important points emerge from the comparison. Rising expectations which characterise poor people's perception, as well as the increasing market dependence (often accompanied by liquidation of assets) are found to play an important role in the apparent divergence. This comparison, by pointing out that the data are not intrinsically comparable helps providing a more complete picture of deprivation in Uganda with different methods contributing different insights. At the same time, this comparison stresses the importance of some methodological features (e.g. the PPA's disaggregation by gender, region etc vs. the household level analysis of the household survey; the country wide representative sample of the household survey vs. the hand-picked choice of districts in the UPPAP to cover a plurality of situations) which have a bearing on the results of the two assessments, and which are a challenge for any comparative study.

Various studies have tried to overcome some of the methodological barriers to comparability, and scrutinise the claim that "PRA techniques produce very similar quantitative data results to that of standard questionnaires" and that "they do this in a way that is (i) more cost-effective to funding agencies; (ii) less time-intensive for recipient communities; (iii) more enjoyable for recipient communities (e.g. IIED 1997)" (Davies et al. 1999, p.6). We will take up these claims in turn.

The effective possibility of obtaining quantitative information from participatory assessments affects the extent to which participatory techniques can replace other more mainstream ones. In this respect distinctions are made between different forms of quantitative outputs. Wealth rankings, for example are often found to result in similar rankings as monetary ones (Scoones 1995). At the same time it is noted that "A comparison of the different rankings demonstrates the need to carry out several different rankings in order to explore the diversity of local perceptions" (ibid. p.77), as women rankings' are found to differ the most from survey data's, therefore pointing to gender as an important axe of difference in that context (with ecological zone, age, ethnicity being suggested as other, possibly more important in other contexts).⁶ Further, it is noted that though correlations of rankings might be rather high, the adoption of a single indicator from survey data might not proxy local people's rankings correctly, even when that indicator is one to which local people attach importance. Wealth or well-being evaluation takes into account, in fact, several indicators, with an implicit evaluation of the trade-offs between achievements in one or the other. At the same time, discrepancies might be found between what is assumed by local people and what is happening relying, as local knowledge of certain issues might be imperfect (see also more below in section 6; in the case in question it was found, for example, that the difference in the rankings of two households depended from an overestimation of the level of remittances they were believed to be receiving from town).

An interesting feature of wealth rankings is that, as they arrive at some form of ordinal information, their numerical nature is not much disputed.⁷ Other quantitative outputs based on attempts at cardinalising information gathered with participatory techniques have been subject to heavier criticism (see more below).

⁶ Scoones (1995), however, raises some doubts on whether different focus groups for men and women are sufficient to capture the extent of intrahousehold difference, and more generally on the significance of rankings at the household level whether based on surveys or local people's perceptions.

⁷ Though of course it can be disputed on ethical grounds whether it is acceptable to ask members of the community to arrive at such ordinal information.

In the Zimbabwean study mentioned above (Davies et al 1999), it was found, for example, that “while some fairly similar results were obtained for some variables, there were some major difference and that for the more quantitative data the PRA information seemed less reliable than the survey and key informant data” (p.24). Interestingly the authors point also to confusion in the standard survey as different types of baskets produced had been aggregated into one question, while there was a clear gender differentiation in production of different types of baskets. Because of this gender division of labour and the tendency to interview men as household heads, this resulted in biases in the estimation of income.⁸

As far as cost-effectiveness is concerned, participatory assessments allow the researchers to gather a great deal of information in a relatively short time. Further, participatory methods can be applied to the analysis of issues for which monetary assessments would require a great amount of data. Kozel and Parker (1999), for example, relate that in a large exercise comparing participatory with survey based assessments the description of better off households was very similar across the two types of analysis. Participatory analysis, however, also allowed a discussion of dynamic issues, which would have required the availability of panel data in a monetary assessment. These exercises showed that the determinants of improvements in welfare were different from the causes of existing wealth. While landowning people were considered better off, acquisition of land was difficult and it was not seen therefore as a way of improving one’s lot.

At the same time, the Zimbabwean study we referred to above also discussed cost-effectiveness, and arrived at the conclusion that “the community time spent in PRA exercises was very roughly five times greater than that spent in the household survey” (p. 27). The authors also recognise, however, how other objectives need to be considered in the selection of methods. If the assessment is part of the preparatory work for a project, for example, participatory techniques even if more time-intensive might be chosen as they enhance the degree of community involvement. Further, that study chose to operate groups of rather large size with a consequent increase in the estimated opportunity cost of time spent doing the participatory exercises.

A different issue, still related to time, is that participatory assessments, though more rapid than anthropological techniques, require the researcher to spend some time with a community and to let the views of the poor themselves shape the understanding of poverty. A study comparing targeting criteria based on a traditional survey and participatory assessments of wellbeing found that survey information was highly deficient. In rural areas, in fact, the income module of the questionnaire proved very deceptive as it was only recording labour income. Participatory assessments, in contrast, were able to identify a variety of livelihood sources (McGee 1999). Such a narrow characterisation of income sources from the traditional survey, however, seems more an example of bad practice – though one which the people responsible of the survey did not seem very keen to address claiming it would complicate the administration of the questionnaires even further – than a necessary characteristic of the monetary approach. A general argument on the inflexibility of the questionnaires as research tools when compared to participatory techniques however seems well founded, and points to the need to base them on substantial previous knowledge on the environment in which the surveys are going to be run.

6. Criticisms

In this section we will briefly review the major criticisms which have been raised about participatory techniques in poverty analysis. We will not deal here specifically with a number of concerns which have been raised within practitioners doing PRA about PPAs, such as the danger of “scaling up” (both in terms of participatory exercises undertaken and in terms of moving from local assessments to national ones) and the move away from a non-extractive methodology which PPAs might entail.

⁸ On a similar line, in another study on a sample of Zimbabwean households (Scoones 1995) one of the reasons responsible for differences in the wealth rankings between male and female groups was found in women greater awareness of (and importance given to) cash income sources generated by women.

A first fundamental criticism has already been introduced elsewhere in this paper. This refers to the relation between poor people's perceptions and the final output of participatory assessments. The literature on participation refers to "self-critical epistemological awareness" (Chambers 1997) on the part of the researcher as the crucial element which ensures that the former are translated into the latter. This should ensure that results are questioned and confirmed by "triangulation", so that individual perceptions are contextualised. It seems nevertheless that there are elements of inescapable arbitrariness in the process, even when done following best practice. Making sense of a complex reality as revealed by multiple outputs means that some effort of synthesising and structuring information has to be performed, and these efforts are not value free processes. It seems therefore that being aware of one's valuational load does not make an assessment value free, only more honest.⁹

Critics of participation have also raised some fundamental concerns about the idea of participation as a decision making mechanism in general. There are different aspects to this argument. One is that "Questions about participation cannot avoid the issue of political power, local power, populism and representation. They cannot avoid issues of moral pluralism [...] or cultural diversity [...]" Similar concerns with "the myth of the community" have also been voiced within the camp of the proponents of participatory techniques. Welbourn (1991, quoted in McGee 1997) gives the examples of age, gender, ethnicity and poverty as dimensions of heterogeneity within the community. Improved methods, and ethnographic analysis of every stage of the research process have been suggested as possible solutions (ibid.). It has been claimed however that "because participation is a social act that springs from a preexisting set of social relations it is more readily applied in situations that condone and reinforce the set of social relations" (da Cunha et al 1997). And as the process of constructing "social knowledge" (Razavi 1998) relies on public and formal events it might be difficult to disentangle the voices of the poor from the influence of existing power structures.

From the point of view of research and assessment rather than participatory governance, the issue can be addressed if not necessarily solved by appropriate methodological steps (e.g. careful selection of group composition and triangulation -- by working with other groups and by using different instruments -- to calibrate the informative value of any given assessment, or to identify whose reality is being counted, in a fashion not dissimilar to what would happen if one was using key informants). Further, important decisions on how to present the research and its aims need to be taken, trying to prevent participants from seeing the assessment as responding to some special interest (e.g. those of the people or organisations who have been instrumental in organising a meeting, especially NGOs, donors etc.). In the last analysis, however, if something more than a description of different views is to be arrived at, some interpretation of how the views can be reconciled needs to be performed.

Another kind of criticism is represented by the example of women collectives in Chiapas investing large amounts of money in unproductive investments on the basis of incorrect local knowledge (da Cunha 1997). What if local people don't have the appropriate local knowledge? Such an example goes right against the fundamental principles of participatory approaches, i.e. that poor people are able to analyse their own reality for themselves. But the approach might not reach the "appropriate" conclusions in rapidly changing conditions (e.g. in marginal land subject to population increases and rapid environmental degradation) and in the context of increasingly complex markets. As far as PPAs are concerned, however, it seems hard to see what kind of "misinformation" could prevent people from identifying their own criteria of well-being or their own descriptions of the dynamics which affect it.

On more technical grounds, participatory techniques do not escape some of the important problems faced by welfare economics such as how to make interpersonal comparisons of wellbeing. "determining whether the decision represents the group best interest is difficult because it requires comparing interpersonal well-being, whether by aggregating preferences or establishing a hierarchy of preferences" (da Cunha et al. 1997). While this is quite a damning criticism from an economist's point of view, it might be worth remarking that

⁹ It could also be argued that often not enough emphasis is put on self-critical epistemological awareness to be displayed when letting patterns "emerge" from all kinds of different results.

economists themselves adopt concepts (such as social welfare functions or household preferences) which presuppose that those same issues have been resolved, without having specified how. This does not mean, however, that disregard for the difficulties of making interpersonal comparisons should be stretched excessively. For example, attaching a cardinal value to different types of rankings, i.e. to deduct the intensity of the superiority of one option over the other or the importance of one criteria over the other in determining someone's wellbeing, seem to be very arbitrary.

Serious concerns can also be raised about the elements that participatory assessments structurally miss. For example, both anthropological studies and participatory ones find that often poor people identify other groups as even more poor than themselves. Remarkably, these poorer groups are described in very unfavourable terms, almost as belonging to a subhuman category, and they are "regarded with mixtures of pity, fear, disgust and hatred"(Narayan et al. (1999), para. 32). At the same time they appear to be excluded from the poverty assessments – possibly because they are cut off from social relations with the rest of society and they have fallen out of the reciprocity networks for too long. Nothing, however, is made of this finding,¹⁰ and no explanation is given of why they are not reached by the assessments – while knowledge about them is crucial for designing policies to alleviate the worst forms of poverty.

Further, the narrow contextualisation of participatory assessments may impose limitations, preventing them from capturing a more general picture from which differentiation might emerge. For example, when analysing different kinds of communities, one might not be able to capture the perception of the differences between them, which could be an important component of deprivation when the different communities interact.

In conclusion, basing an assessment on participation and consensus, however well any dissent is documented, is effectively built on the idea of finding a shared interpretation of reality. And the way in which consensus is reached and its ability to represent all the views (rather than internalised constraints and lack of real empowerment) can be challenged even when best practice is followed, as there might not be as pervasive an homogeneity as initially assumed. The impossibility of solving some fundamental conflicts, and doubts on whose voices are really heard (especially when, despite triangulating the result and putting them into context by working with different groups, there is a risk of overlooking important axes of difference within the community) represent therefore serious challenges to this approach. This, of course, might affect different uses of participatory methods in different ways, depending on the context and the issues considered.

7. New frontiers: combined methods

From the debate on PRA new insights have been gained. This has led to questioning the original characterisation of participatory approaches as antithetical to the collection of household survey data, as well to attempts to use participatory and non-participatory techniques interactively, exploiting their respective strengths. Carvalho et al. (1997) synthesises these possibilities in terms of: (i) integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies (e.g. using one type of methods to identify key categories to be studied with the other, or using insights from one method to inform the sample design to be used with the other method); (ii) examining, explaining, confirming, refuting and/or enriching information from one approach with that from the other; (iii) merging the findings from the two approaches into a set of policy recommendations. An interesting example is provided by Carter et al. (Carter et al. 1999) whose identification of households in a large survey was based on a livelihood classification scheme derived from a participatory assessment (similarly, Scoones 1995 suggests using "wealth ranking ... as cost-effective research tool for examining issues of wealth and poverty in rural context, perhaps setting the agenda for subsequent, more detailed and focused studies into particular aspects", p. 86)

Note however, that this development could be criticised as bringing participatory techniques into the mainstream poverty analysis tool kit, therefore changing their non-extractive nature, making it respond to

¹⁰ Thanks to Howard White for drawing my attention to this point.

outsiders' priorities as well as bringing about the danger of a routinisation of the process (Chambers 1994, b). This does not need to be the case, however. As some of the participatory methods lead to quantitative evidence, usually of an ordinal nature, there is a potential for linking qualitative and quantitative methods (see literature quoted in Booth et al. 1998), without reducing the insights from participatory methods only to those which can be quantified.

8. Conclusions

From the initial programmatic endorsements of participation in the 1970's to the widespread adoption of participatory processes today, intended to initiate a new dynamics of change and empowerment, the language and methods of participation seem to have entered the centre of development thinking and practice. In this paper, however, we have tried to show that participation is a port manteau term which covers a number of different things. We discussed this issue both by looking at the concept of participation and the tensions in the way it is conceptualised by different agents, and by discussing the way participatory methods have been used in the analysis of poverty. While elements of the theoretical debate are also present in the latter more specific case, such as justifying the adoption of participatory techniques for efficiency reasons as against doing so because of the intrinsic value of participation, our discussion of the uses of participatory methods in the analysis of poverty has also highlighted some more specific issues.

The central challenge faced in using participatory methods for poverty analysis is implicit in moving participatory techniques from the project level to policy processes. While in fact there have been examples of Participatory Poverty Assessments which have greatly contributed to the policy debate at the national level, many examples of cosmetic participatory research, performed for extractive purposes and without a commitment to empowering local people to have a greater say in policy processes, can also be found. We also discussed criticisms of a different kind, challenging the idea of participatory methods as accurate and appropriate research tools for poverty analysis. In this context, it is important to consider instances of comparative research adopting different methods of analysis, both participatory and non-participatory, highlighting their relative strengths and weaknesses. In the light of these debates, a move to new and integrated frameworks for the analysis of poverty seem almost inevitable. Such a research agenda has now entered the mainstream of development practice, with the 23 country study "Voices of the poor" (Narayan et al 2000) being the pinnacle of a sustained effort to adopt both standard monetary poverty assessments and participatory ones. Whose voices are being recorded and what it means to be listening are questions, however, which remain central to any future development of these methods.

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