Deepening and scaling participatory research with the poorest and most marginalised

Danny Burns

Insitute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, United Kingdom

A B S T R A C T

This paper assesses three research projects focusing respectively on disability, peace building and slavery in a variety of international development contexts. It discusses the evolution of methodologies which enable meaningful and extensive participation in the research process by people living in poverty and marginalisation, and which enable participatory methods to go to scale. The paper shows how these processes are built on methodological pluralism combined with iterative methodological reflection. The paper argues that large scale participatory processes of this sort demonstrate significant methodological rigour and analytical robustness, and are highly effective processes for generating impactful systemic intervention.

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1. Introduction

This paper traces the methodological development of three research projects that I have co-led and facilitated over five years. While these were conducted in the tradition of systemic action research, my practice is very similar to that undertaken by many community operational researchers, so the methodological innovation I present in this paper should resonate closely with readers of this journal.

The first project I will discuss, in Bangladesh, focused on how people living with disabilities could research and analyse their own realities to improve their situation (Burns & Oswald, 2015). The second, in Myanmar, engaged networks of community-based organisations in research to support peace building. The third, which is on-going, is a large scale research programme in India and Nepal to generate ground level knowledge in the fight against slavery and bonded labour.

The methodological development of each of these projects was based on the foundation of learning from the ones that preceded them. As the methodological story unfolds, we see how a life story approach was deepened and made more rigorous; how it led to the development of a collective process that could generate a systemic analysis of large numbers of narratives in real time; how this opened up pathways for multiple action research streams; and how, in turn, these streams were triangulated through a large-scale participatory statistics process. The paper focuses on how the participatory research was deepened and scaled, and explores (amongst other issues) questions of rigour and methodological pluralism. In particular, it discusses two key challenges:

- How can the poorest and most marginalised be effectively and meaningfully engaged in participatory research?
- How can participatory methods be scaled so projects are not entirely localised and dismissed as anecdotal?

The first of these challenges is central to the theory and practice of Community OR (Midgley, Johnson & Chichirau, 2018). Midgley et al argue that the defining feature of Community OR is "the meaningful engagement of communities", and what counts as 'meaningful' in any particular project needs to be justified in relation to the local context. They also discuss the case for prioritising engagement with the most disadvantaged and marginalised.

Regarding the second bullet point above, the critical issue is not only how to achieve scale and depth in participatory inquiry (both of which are a challenge in themselves), but *how to achieve them simultaneously* so they are not traded off against each other. This paper explores the methodological innovation that has enabled the achievement of simultaneous scale and depth, and how it has evolved. It does not substantively engage with the findings of the three projects I discuss, except where they illustrate methodological points. These findings have been covered in more detail elsewhere (Burns, 2007; Burns & Worsley, 2015).

As noted earlier, I have been working primarily within a tradition of action research, and in particular *systemic* action research (Burns, 2007; Burns & Worsley, 2015). This has strong parallels with the Community OR tradition, so learning across the two research communities should be fruitful. The following statement articulates a common concern of the two fields:

E-mail address: d.burns@ids.ac.uk

"It is the particular focus on *methodology and methods* (usually grounded in theories of community organisation, social systems, complexity, power and/or participation) that marks the distinctive contribution of the Community OR network to community development" (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2004a, p.2).

As Midgley and Ochoa-Arias point out, methodology should not be articulated as emancipatory in its own right, and nor should any method be used uncritically. Nevertheless, how things are done makes a difference to what social change is possible, and methods open up pathways which might not otherwise be available. There are also parallels with Community-Based Operations Research (CBOR) (Johnson, 2012) with its focus on poverty and marginalisation in highly complex environments:

"Community-based operations research is defined as the collection of analytical methods applied to problem domains in which interests of under-represented, under-served, or vulnerable populations in localised jurisdictions, formal or informal, receive special emphasis, and for which solutions to problems of core concern for daily living must be identified and implemented so as to jointly optimize economic efficiency, social equity, and administrative burdens. As such, it represents a specific domain within public-sector OR. Community-based operations research (OR) problems tend to be "messy" and highly dependent on political and social considerations" (Johnson & Smilowitz, 2007, p.102).

A lot of participatory work focuses on surfacing 'issues' which then become the subject of community engagement. I have argued (Burns, 2014) that a more effective approach is to identify system patterns and dynamics, to explore what pathways of agency they open up and close down, and to identify leverage points for action from that analysis. This can be seen as a form of systemic intervention (Midgley, 2000). The Community OR and CBOR traditions, which have primarily had US and Western European foci in their early years (Midgley et al, 2018), have emerged in parallel with movements for participatory research in international development (Chambers, 1983) as well as more recent work on systems thinking and complexity applied in the same domain (Boulton, Allen, & Bowman, 2015; Burns, 2007; Burns & Worsley, 2015; Ramalingam, 2013). I suggest that the challenges of depth and scale are common across all these areas of practice, so community operational researchers might gain some methodological insight from seeing how they have been tackled in international development.

1.1. Deepening participatory research

Participatory research processes typically engage with fieldworkers, local leaders (usually men) and even poor farmers, but rarely engage with the millions who are really surviving at the margins or barely surviving at all - people living with disabilities, or slaves, or people displaced by war, or people so poor that they don't know if they will have enough food for the day. Other people tend to speak on their behalf, even in participatory processes, or their perspectives are simply excluded because researchers assume that if you have engaged people in a village then you have engaged the whole community. Sometimes research is called participatory, but it only involves the 'stakeholders', and these can be too narrowly defined (excluding ordinary community members) if little thought is given to the boundaries of engagement (Midgley, 2000; Ulrich, 1994). People are often excluded, even from data collection (let alone decision making), because they cannot read or see or speak. Indeed, when marginalised people are involved beyond data collection it is usually only in localised participatory analysis - the meta-analysis and data synthesis is still done by 'professional researchers'.

The methods and practices which have been evolved through the projects described here assume that people who experience poverty and marginalisation can and should be actively engaged in all stages of the research cycle, from conception to analysis to the generation of solutions and action to implement them. Nevertheless, working with people on the margins means adapting our methods so they are accessible and meaningful. Validity is derived from using the right method to fit the people and the context, not from shoehorning people into the method. The later tends to produce methodologically consistent but frequently useless knowledge. I thus highlight the importance of both 'emergent methodology' (e.g., Allsop & Taket, 2003) and 'methodological pluralism' (e.g., Jackson, 1988; Midgley, 2000).

1.2. Scaling participatory research

Participatory research has a long tradition of generating rich and rigorous analysis, but it has mostly been focused on the local – either geographically, such as a local village; or organisationally, such as a management team. Much of my work over the past 15 years has been focused on how participatory research can be scaled (Burns, 2007; Burns & Worsley, 2015). Scaling is important because it enables the action research process to have a wider systemic impact.

When we talk about scaling participatory research we are referring to two things. The first is scaling of the research process itself, and the second is scaling the impact. The first requires us to build a multi-stranded learning architecture, which can engage across a large issue or geographical terrain. The second requires us to understand how change happens and how it is gets seeded, nurtured, connected and spread. Here our focus is on *horizontal* spread, and it requires a deep challenge to the idea that scale can be 'driven' through a top-down process, or 'rolled out'. Rather, it needs to be 'nurtured'. Scaling involves adoption and adaption by those in proximity to an innovation, mediated through relationships of trust. This leads to ownership and championing and rapid horizontal spread. Once there is momentum around this spread, *vertical* communication comes into play, as agencies of various kinds can create enabling policy environments to ensure sustainability (Burns & Worsley, 2015). The methodological innovations that I describe here relate to both scaling the research *and* the impact.

2. A sequence of participatory research projects

Next I describe how the methods for simultaneously deepening and scaling participation evolved in the context of the three projects. In Fig. 1, if we move from left to right across the table, each of the methods gets more sophisticated, their reach gets wider, and the combination of methods gets more extensive.

2.1. Disability research in Bangladesh

The first project in this sequence was a small piece of work with people living with disabilities in Bangladesh. While in most low income countries people with disabilities account for between 15 and 25% of the population, disability has been seriously neglected in international development. The majority of disabled people (although not all) are amongst the poorest in their countries, and they get dramatically less access to public services such as education.

The aim of this research was to get a truly grounded perspective on how people living with disabilities experienced life in Bangladesh, and how they wanted their lives to improve. The project was conceived as a pilot in deep participation. By this we meant that the research data would be collected and analysed by