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Challenging and changing the big picture: the roles of participatory research in public policy planning

by CHARLES EHRHART

This article examines the guiding ideas and ultimate realities of government-led participatory research in Tanzania and Uganda. It considers the extent to which research results have influenced meso- (e.g. district) and macro- (e.g. national) level planning for poverty reduction and why; the degree to which research processes have contributed to democratisation and citizen empowerment; and implications for the future of participatory approaches to policy-oriented research.

Introduction
The World Bank and similarly powerful institutions have come to acknowledge that their ideas about development cannot be imported and applied wholesale irrespective of the different circumstances faced by people in poor countries. At the very least, information about local specificities is now regarded as a prerequisite to:
• customising conventional development proscriptions/ rationalising public policy decisions; and,
• monitoring their implementation.

The interest in data to inform Poverty Reduction Strategies is now merging with the need to monitor progress towards Millennium Development Goals and bilateral donors' wi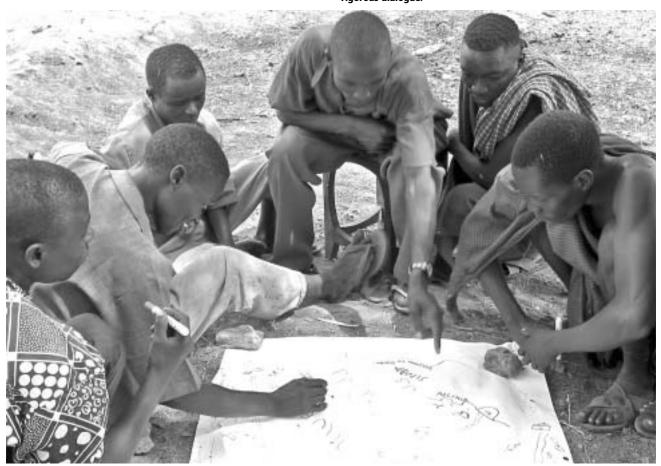sh to streamline development assistance/improve the performance of sector ministries. As a result, there is unprecedented pressure for poor countries to generate up-to-date, detailed socio-economic data.

In East Africa, this has led to many changes. The most comprehensive response to the demand for development data has been in mainland Tanzania, where the government's Poverty Monitoring System is quickly becoming a regional model. Though less sweeping, important changes have also been made in Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar. In each case, changes include:
• enhanced coordination by central government (typically under the ministry responsible for preparing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) in order to improve information flows and reduce duplication of efforts;
• an emphasis on practical 'partnerships' involving central government, donors, CSOs and, to a lesser extent, the private sector; and,
• the use of participatory research methods to inform, monitor, and advance public planning for poverty reduction.

This article looks at the biggest examples of participatory, policy-oriented research in East Africa; namely, the Tanzania Participatory Poverty Assessment (TzPPA) and the Uganda PPA Process (UPPAP).

Data was brought together and changed into information and ideas in small groups. This approach allowed triangulation and the evolution of individual positions through rigorous dialogue.

Photo: Charles Ehrhart

Participatory Poverty Assessments

The first Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) were conducted in Africa during the early 1990s. Together with information generated through surveys and individual interviews, their findings were meant by the World Bank to show the complex relationship between poverty profiles, public policies, expenditures, and institutions.

PPAs quickly spread beyond the Bank to other agencies, where they continued to evolve and develop in terms of methodology and objectives. As a result, there are many different definitions of what a PPA is and no apparent agreement on what a PPA is not. In the midst of continuing debate, the many goals of PPAs have grown to include:
• providing critical information (especially qualitative data inaccessible to surveys) on which to base effective plans for poverty reduction;
• building poor people's capacity to analyse and solve their problems;
• stimulating local activities for poverty reduction (i.e. widespread community-based planning);

• raising poor people's awareness of their rights and responsibilities;
• changing policy makers' understanding of and attitudes towards poor people by involving government officials in the research process;
• building governments' capacity for poverty analysis and policy design; and,
• ensuring that Poverty Reduction Strategies reflect the priority needs of poor people.

Not all PPAs aim to meet all these goals, nor do all PPAs meet their goals. However, many are realised and have made important contributions to poverty reduction efforts at local, national, and international levels.

The Tanzania Participatory Poverty Assessment and the Uganda PPA Process

The 2002-3 TzPPA explored the causes, consequences, and policy implications of 'vulnerability' in thirty sites. Locations were spread throughout the country and selected on the basis of representing diverse livelihood (agriculture, live-

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stock-keeping, fishing, and town-based work) conditions. Research teams were composed of six people from local and central government, as well as national and international civil society organisations, and they lived for up to three weeks in each site.

The first round of UPPAP lasted from 1998 to 2001. During this time, it worked in 36 communities – most of which were selected because they were especially poor. This approach to site selection maximised opportunities for the country's poorest people to communicate their experiences and priority problems. Nonetheless, it also meant that UPPAP's research results were less representative of conditions in Uganda as a whole. Three-person teams spending up to two weeks per community conducted research. As with the TzPPA, these teams were multi-sectoral and involved people from local government. This strategy worked well in both cases and was retained in UPPAP's second cycle, which began in 2001[1].

Methods and methodology

Many aspects of the TzPPA and UPPAP – including their core beliefs, principles, and methods – are typical of good participatory research in general. Thus, their approaches were founded upon:
- the belief that ordinary people are knowledgeable about, and are capable of particularly reliable and insightful analysis of their own life-circumstances;
- the principle that all people – irrespective of age, gender, level of formal education, etc. – have a fundamental right to participate in informing the decisions that shape their lives;
- the use of visual methods, such as seasonal calendars, Venn diagrams, etc. to facilitate the meaningful involvement of people in the research process; and,
- a commitment to sharing ownership of research results with local people and facilitating – through community

[1] More information about the TzPPA can be found at www.esrftz.org/ppa and about UPPAP at www.uppap.org

and district workshops – the identification of practical measures people can take to improve their lives.

In both Tanzania and Uganda, researchers were provided with an extended residential training programme. In the case of UPPAP, this lasted three weeks and focused on PRA principles and methods as well as improving report-writing skills. In Tanzania, training was composed of:
- a one-week course examining how public policies are made, the scope of poverty-oriented public policies in Tanzania and specific features of key policies;
- three weeks learning about the ideas and methods of participatory research (including two special sessions on working with hard-to-reach social groups and researching sensitive subjects like substance abuse and domestic violence); and,
- three weeks jointly planning implementation (including sessions on comprehensive note-taking and report-writing).

The TzPPA's extended preparatory period paid dividends in the long run as it led to (a) **more informed assessment of policies** and (b) **smoother implementation** because researchers themselves had been part of the decision-making process that established reporting procedures, standards of behaviour etc.

Methodological differences

The two most significant methodological differences between the TzPPA and UPPAP surround their engagement in community-based planning and the size of research activities.

Community-based planning

Though the primary objective was to improve district- and national-level planning processes, UPPAP also established Community Action Plans (CAPs) and committed itself to assisting in their implementation.

This decision was value driven. Indeed, members of UPPAP's Implementing Consortium (IC) feared that without instituting CAPs their work would have been fundamentally extractive and exploitative. While well meant, the practice of combining a nationwide research project with community-based action plans proved to be a major problem because:
- Some IC members (such as the National Bureau of Statistics) were ill suited to helping implement CAPs. Those that could found their human and other resources incapable of dealing in a timely manner with the scattered nature of partner communities and the diverse problems they prioritised. Moreover, attending to CAPs was at odds with

The TzPPA initiated work in each community with a video presentation. The novelty drew huge crowds who listened to a consistent, dramatised explanation of what the TzPPA sought to do, what opportunities it offered and didn't, and what the research process would be like. This substantially reduced the risk of raising false expectations
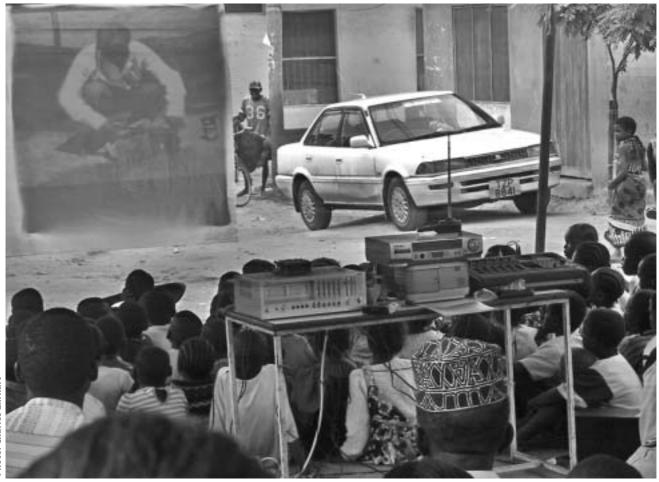

Photo: Charles Ehrhart

expectations for IC members to remain in political centres where they could contribute to advocating pro-poor policy changes.

• Due to the irreconcilability of these tensions, the lag between CAP formulation and implementation was excessive. In the meantime, many local priorities had changed, some community members had forgotten about UPPAP and others had grown bitter with the certainty that researchers had never intended to return and fulfil people's expectations of aid.

As a result of this experience, as well as consultations with local authorities and community members during its design phase, the TzPPA chose not to engage in CAPs. Besides the difficulty of doing otherwise, it was argued that PPA-incited CAPs would duplicate the responsibilities of others' under the Local Government Reform Programme (LGRP). Also, community members said the research would not be exploitative **if** the results were shared with them and

if researchers used it to advocate their interests. For these three reasons, the TzPPA opted to make just one promise; that is, to wholeheartedly try challenging and changing public policies in light of information and insights from the grassroots.

From village assemblies to focus groups
UPPAP aimed to involve as many community members in each of its activities as possible. In contrast, the TzPPA only sought large, community-wide meetings as venues in which to introduce itself and feedback/triangulate research results on the last day. Depending on their subjects, intervening activities aimed at involving between eight to sixteen participants in order to maximise the likelihood that all present would have a meaningful chance to share, debate, and refine their inputs.

This approach suited the TzPPA's needs. When the goal is participatory planning, facilitators typically seek a rela-

tively small number of inclusive meetings wherein a critical degree of consensus can be fashioned around a specific course of action. In the process of pursuing this worthwhile goal, marginal perspectives and agendas for change are frequently left behind.

In contrast, the TzPPA did not need to develop 'community consensus'. In order to fulfil its mandate and contribute to well-informed policies at various levels of government, it sought to learn about the range of conditions people face, as well as their concerns, competing priorities, success stories, etc. Instead of determining a single course of action, it could – on the basis of such rich information – recommend hundreds. This is an ideal outcome that would undermine the likelihood of community-based planning leading anywhere at all.

Benefits

Participatory Action Research in general, and PRA/PLA in particular, typically seek to benefit participants in two ways. These are:
• improving the material and/or social conditions in which they live; and,
• enhancing people's power to shape their lives.
Therefore, it is worth asking how the TzPPA and UPPAP lived up to these goals.

Policy impact

Both UPPAP and the TzPPA generated a large amount of high quality, practical information that could not have been developed through conventional survey-based research. By feeding these results back to policy makers at meso- and macro- levels in a variety of easily accessible formats they were both able to have immediate, significant impact on policies at local (district and community) levels.

While cases of change at the local level are plentiful, the impact of the TzPPA and UPPAP on national-level policies remains less clear. It is, perhaps, too early to tell whether or not the 2002-3 TzPPA will have an important effect. Yet a number of important policy changes have been attributed to UPPAP. Of these, the highest in profile are:
• the decentralisation of budget-item decisions to districts (allowing local government to decide how to spend their health or infrastructure budgets, for instance); and,
• a substantial increase in the proportion of Uganda's national budget allocated to water and sanitation services.

These changes are important. However, valid questions remain. First is the extent to which these and other policies were, in fact, influenced by findings from UPPAP. Second is

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Box 1: Local change due to participatory research

Some of the best examples of local change set in motion by the TzPPA are in Ilala Municipal District, Dar es Salaam Region, where municipal staff and community members planned responses to research results. These included:
• Provision of counselling and other forms of targeted assistance (e.g. training in alternative employment and soft loans) to commercial sex workers.
• A new strategy to encourage equal provision of schooling opportunities to girl and boy children. This strategy, unlike those in the past, begins from an understanding of local ideas about gender and education.
• The creation by community members of transparent criteria for priority support to especially poor households.

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why equally important (if not more important) findings about insecurity, corruption, and macroeconomic policies were not addressed.

The answer to both questions points to the same conclusion; that is, PPAs are more 'consultative' than 'participatory' because government is under no obligation to take their findings into account in policy decisions. This does not imply governments should adhere verbatim to recommendations coming from community members. To the contrary, one of government's responsibilities is to balance the concerns of individuals and particular social groups/regions with others and all of this against financial constraints, etc. But the majority of policy makers still see themselves as having no obligation to either negotiate or explain their decisions to the public. Until this changes, it seems likely that they will continue to use research results that support their positions and disregard those which are, for whatever reason, unpalatable.

Empowerment

The methods through which the TzPPA and UPPAP generated their findings contributed to participants developing a deeper understanding of local realities. As evidenced by the ways in which they sometimes took these insights and transformed them into action, a degree of 'empowerment' took place at the grassroots. Nonetheless, this should not be overstated.

Because the presence of PPAs in each community was fleeting in comparison to the long-term partnerships that characterise effective community-based planning, the extent to which they shifted perceptions and power relations was almost certainly far less. This is not to say that the TzPPA and UPPAP failed to challenge or affect power relations. To the contrary, these projects invested a great deal of resources into training team members in research and

advocacy skills. Moreover, these urban-based professionals gained a great deal of information and insights from, as well as invigorated sympathy for, people at the grassroots.

Without doubt, this has contributed in both Tanzania and Uganda to the capacity of civil society to understand, communicate, and exert political pressure for positive social change. It has also helped improve understanding and dialogue between civil society and governments – the significance of which should not be understated. This may amount to empowerment of poor people by proxy and, as such is surely less than ideal. Yet realistic alternatives are unclear since effective advocacy – especially at macro levels – requires contacts, planning, and a command of relevant information that is simply inaccessible to most poor people.

Conclusions
PPAs have their potential pitfalls and limitations. For instance:
- It would be counterproductive (and logistically impossible) to involve all stakeholders. Thus, good representation is necessary – and dangerous because some points of view may (wittingly or not) be excluded.
- Not everyone in a community will want to invest their time in the process of participatory research – especially when they expect a welfare relationship to government or lack faith that their efforts will be heard and listened to.
- Many development issues are extraordinarily complex and far removed from the direct experience of ordinary people. Therefore, it may be impossible for PPAs to rigorously examine some issues without demanding too much of people's time.
- PPAs can generate quantitative and qualitative development data. However, they cannot identify the scope of certain conditions or practices across a region or country.
- Participatory research does not 'help' conventional decision makers. To the contrary, it is much easier for them to draw conclusions without the information provided by PPAs. Good research exposes competing interests, chal-

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lenges orthodox assumptions, and reveals complexities that make decision-making very, very difficult.
- PPAs are time-consuming and expensive in comparison with the process of elites meeting behind closed doors, speculating about citizens' lives, and setting policy.
- Many of the forces causing and perpetuating poverty in East Africa are rooted in the policies of distant countries and institutions. Though PPAs may demonstrate such linkages, there is a tragic disconnection between these findings, advocacy efforts, and policy change.

Despite these hurdles, the TzPPA and UPPAP have shown the potential of participatory, policy-oriented research to improve policy-making processes and outcomes. Ironically, one of the greatest threats to participatory policy research as a whole may be the success of these and comparable initiatives. Indeed, there is the risk that governments will be satisfied with their contributions and neglect to explore how other innovations – including citizen report cards, participatory service assessments, and policy relevance tests – could add to development data and further democratisation. In the future, these and other options should be routinely integrated into national poverty monitoring and evaluation strategies to ensure the best possible contexts for community-based planning.

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