

Collectivizing Rural Development: The Bottom- Bottom Approach

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of research in thrusting community involvement in the development process. Talking about participatory action research, the paper outlines the methodologies through which community participation can be effected to ensure sustenance. Highlighting the process of research as the starting point to co produce knowledge and collectively devise programs to thrust rural development, this paper, showcases the experience of conducting action research in rural pockets of select districts of Haryana, India. The paper outlines the experiential learning involved in collecting primary data, generating community interest and implementing programs suited to the needs of the targeted communities. Through a case study, the paper specifically highlights the positive impact on outcomes brought about through sharing research findings with the communities for whom an intervention program was designed.

1. Introduction

The need for community participation in development initiatives was realized during the 1970s, as interventions generally helped the ones who required least help and were also excluded from the development process. Undoubtedly, some benefits ultimately trickled down to the poor people but much of the impacts of development activities were accrued by urban and rural elites (FAO, 2015). A noticeable shift was noticed during 1980s in the rhetoric of rural development. “These shifts include the now familiar reversals from top-down to bottom-up, from centralized standardization to local diversity, and from blueprint to learning process. The move here was towards new approaches and methods for participatory appraisal and analysis in which more of the activities previously appropriated by outsiders are instead carried out by local rural or urban people themselves” (Chambers, 1994). In addition to quantitative tools, qualitative tools were added to effectively include communities in the process. Accordingly, rural rapid appraisals and participatory rural appraisals techniques have seen an increased use in the field of development during the 1980s that continued thereafter.

The 1990s also witnessed an increase in international aid to combat poverty and to increase the level of development across the globe. Millennium Development Goals were framed towards the end of 1990s with specific targets to be achieved by 2015. However, slow reduction in poverty in the developing countries despite huge increase in the international aid for development raised concerns in the field of development. Evaluation of progress made on the MDGs specifically in India showcases that the country is lagging behind on targets set for several goals. The United Nations Report released in the year 2015 suggests that India can improve performance by emulating success from good performers. According to the report, even though, India has achieved few goals, the progress remains uneven. Potentially, this could be evened out with an inclusive approach of ensuring involvement of all groups in the communities. For effective realization of the MDGs, it was imperative that the development process should have been aligned with the local context. It becomes clear that it is difficult to achieve development goals until right solutions are devised which again, is contingent upon involvement of community. In other words, escaping from poverty is not easy and requires locally relevant initiatives. It was clear that no single initiative or policy for a developing country will solve every problem and hence more decentralized solutions should be framed which warranted more community participation to achieve development goals (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). This resulted in adding new dimensions of community participation in the process of development. As a result, community involvement at various stages of development initiatives has paced up. The increase in extent of community involvement can be attributed to several reasons such as diagnosing the problem in the local area correctly so that right solutions can be devised based on local knowledge and resources. This was also emphasized to ensure that the interventions are sustainable and all inclusive.

In a nutshell, the context of rural development was initially etched with elements of universality and congruence. However, since inception, its nature has constantly oscillated from being ‘transactional’ to being ‘transformative’. Graduating with time, the idea of rural development has expanded to accommodate new dimensions of participation that is now considered to be ‘the’ most important facet of bringing about sustainable and effective development. Participation of the rural communities is not only deemed to be essential in implementation of development programs, its importance is increasingly being realized in the planning, execution and impact measurement phase.

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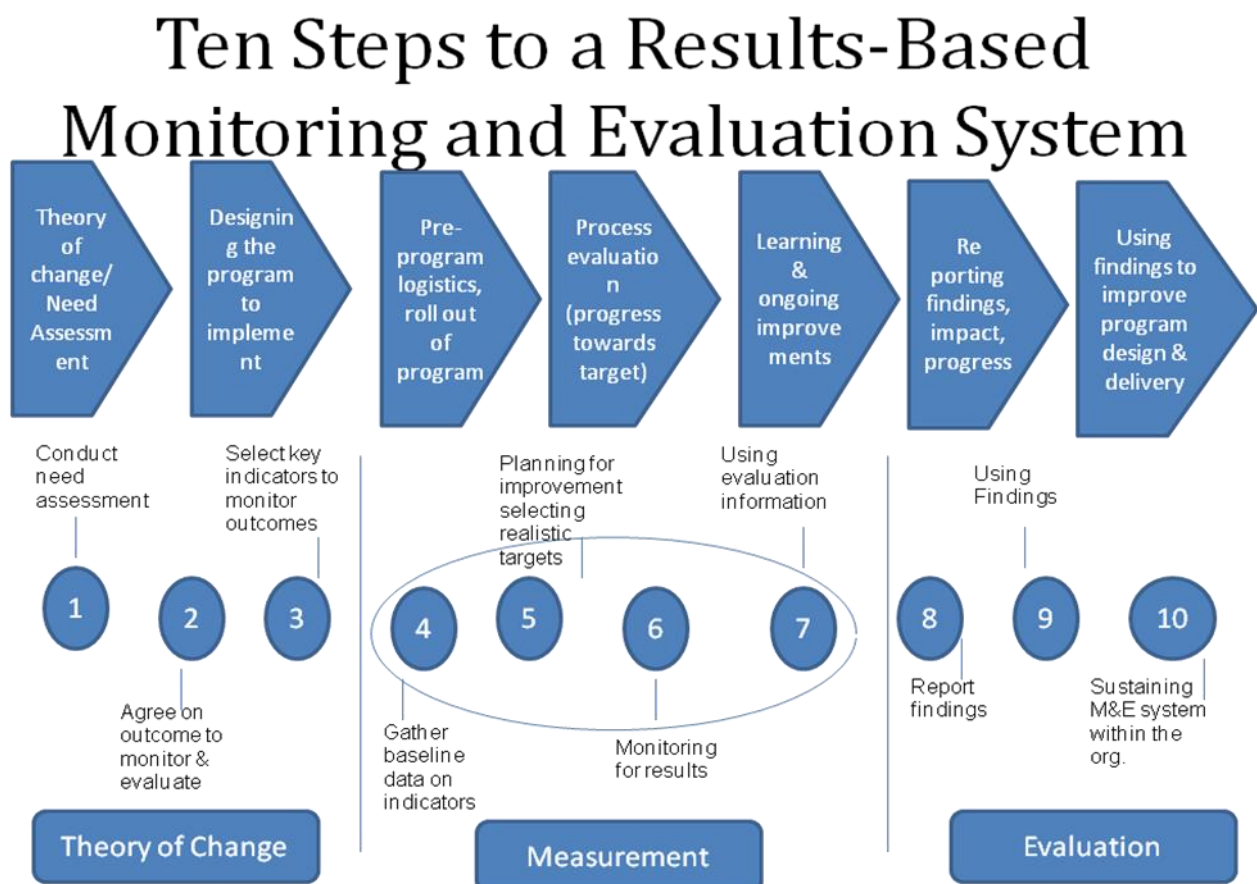
2. Ensuring Community Involvement: The Research Role

With increased investments and slow pace of poverty reduction in the 1990s, greater need was realized for accountability, transparency and decentralization or design of locally relevant interventions. In the process, data became a driving force not only for measuring the success of increased investment but also for designing the right intervention for a given region as there is no one pan solution for achieving development goals across different regions.

In the year 2000, 189 Heads of State approved the Millennium Declaration that outlined their collective commitment towards poverty reduction and sustainable development. The emphasis was on commitments by developing countries to transparency, good governance, and respect for human rights. More importantly, the adoption of the MDGs by developing countries emphasised on the use of Results Based Management (RBM) or Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system as a means for promoting good governance and results-oriented management (Meier, 2003).

The emphasis on RBM increased the role of research in development initiatives. The continuum of RBM involves higher rate of participation of the community for various reasons such as sharing and discussing information and data, their willingness to participate in the design and implementation of the intervention as well as usage of results from the intervention. To ensure sustenance of interventions, it is imperative that the process of RBM thoroughly involves the community at all steps. The steps of RBM as explained below clearly outline the nature and extent of involvement of communities.

The RBM or M&E framework is divided into three broad phases- planning, measurement and evaluation (Figure 1). Involvement of community is warranted in all stages of interventions which initiates right from the planning phase to execution of the project for ensuring desired results not only by the end of the project but also in the long run. The planning phase initiates with priority setting at the local level as needs are always infinite to be achieved by finite resources. Once the set of problems identified, (understanding both the needs of the community, and understanding the problem existing at the local level), it is important to identify the resources available both at local level and from somewhere else (monetary and non-monetary). This can help in devising the right intervention with right goals. Once the intervention is clearly articulated, the next step is to prepare the matrix of activities and outcomes of the selected intervention. The community agreement on the outcomes is essential for their support and understanding of the context in which the intervention is planned to be implemented. It is important to state that in any given intervention, there are both gains and risks involved. This phase ensures the involvement of all stakeholders in a given area, dialogue and negotiations and achieving a result that is adopted and supported by majority of stakeholders.



Source: Kusek et. al, 2004

In the measurement phase of intervention, the focus is on collection of data and using and sharing information throughout the project cycle. This phase involves pre-program logistics and roll out of the program. As the intervention of the project is done over the period of time, this phase also involves understanding the progress towards the target and learnings or improvements. The phase involves collection of baseline data prior to the initiation of project and also to ensure continuous collection and sharing of information with community over the implementation. Community role is vital as their readiness for sharing the information and providing accurate details is essential for the right measurement of success and failure of the project. This involves spending enormous time by the members of the community during the project cycle. The community also involves in framing the right set questions for the purpose of measuring the change over time.

The third and final stage focuses on understanding the change brought by the implementation of the project. The main task is to report the findings from the implementation of the project and share the same not only with the donors but also with the community. Sharing the findings with community can help in building better sustenance of the results from the implementers who generally leave after the project finishes. It is the community who should better understand the details of the change from the intervention and reasons behind the same, which can be used by them for improvements and sustenance of the project in the long run.

With an ever-increasing emphasis on evidence-based development, research has now become an absolute necessity associated with conceptualization and execution of development programs. Using the log-frame approach, research guides every project lifecycle to ensure that the interventions so designed fit with the needs of the intended beneficiaries and are able to bring in the desired impact. It becomes imperative that development research carves out a grounded picture of a community or a beneficiary group under consideration. Taking cognizance of the subjectivity associated with human behavior and interpersonal interactions, it is necessary that research becomes a constant feature underlying the connect with the communities. Alongside this prerequisite comes a daunting challenge of ensuring that research captures the right perspectives and also has the onus of ensuring that the communities realize the tangential benefits associated with it. In doing so, participatory action research has to adopt a community centric role to guide the design, execution and reporting of research findings.

3. Facets of Community Involvement

Over decades of development planning and intervention, the nature and extent of community³ involvement has undergone massive transformation. From interventions being development driven to being community driven, the approach to development gradually took a research-oriented course. In the present day scenario, research in most cases is an integral part of the development planning and implementation process. The concept of community based participatory research (CBPR) has of late gained impetus given the issues of human subjectivity and associated ethics. The degree of community participation in research can vary depending on the nature, longevity and resources in a development project. The Durham Community Research Team (2011) outlines four⁴ degrees of community participation in the research process. To ensure sustainability, it is necessary that participatory projects led by research eventually evolve over time with research participants becoming research partners. Communities are not static and thus, it becomes necessary that research includes new people in the process. Participatory research is also an important subset of the knowledge mobilization initiatives gaining thrust across the globe. It mobilizes the local and indigenous knowledge of people based in communities of place, identity and interest and also enhances the impact of research through facilitating effective knowledge exchange between varied stakeholders (Banks et al, 2013). However, there are several challenges associated with ensuring that CBPR reaches its full potential. These pertain to ensuring perennial involvement of community in the process and simultaneously addressing the ethical issues which surface while conducting participatory research.

Obtaining ‘community buy in’ is essential to ensure development interventions are sustainable. To facilitate community buy in, interventions or development programs at large are designed taking cognizance of community needs. When development programs are designed keeping in mind, the needs of targeted beneficiaries, they are bound to achieve the desired objectives (IFAD, 2009). However, to ensure sustenance of project interventions, it is necessary

³ Communities are generally defined as groups of people who share something in common. For instance, people living in the same area.

⁴ Degree 1: Research controlled by professional researchers with greater or lesser degrees of community participation; Degree 2: Equal partnership between professional researchers and community members; Degree 3: Community controlled with professional researchers and community members and Degree 4: Community controlled and managed with no professional researchers involved.

that the involvement of communities go beyond obtaining community buy in. Community buy in has to gradually evolve into the community taking control over the interventions such that the community members are able to sustain the development thus brought about. To ensure that community needs are captured correctly, role of research is important. It is through effective research that a holistic and analytical perspective of the targeted communities can be captured. In Anthropological projects, ethnographic research is used as an effective means of understanding the community from their own perspective (Hurst, 2015). The relevance of participatory research in development is congruently associated. It helps understand the community needs in relation to the demographic and socio economic profile of the targeted populace. Even though, obtaining community support is 'the' need of the hour felt by most development practitioners worldwide, there are situations where efforts to obtain community support are thwarted due to several reasons of which some are attributed to cultural or demographic factors of the communities. Resultantly, interventions so designed are unable to make the intended impact because of lack of grounded approach, probably a wrong diagnosis of the problem or a culturally irrelevant solution.

Examples from the past clearly indicate that absence of research in the development process has resulted in failure of programs or reduced impact of interventions against desired goals. One such instance is the Central Rural Sanitation Program initiated by the Government of India in the year 1986 that after a decade of implementation was refurbished. The program so initiated with the objective of improving the sanitation situation in the country could not do much despite provision of infrastructural support for building a sanitation facility to the targeted population. This was because the program was not based on any research that could reflect the most urgent needs of the targeted population, which at that point in time, were not related to sanitation. It was only after almost a decade of initiation and efforts entrusted towards making it a success that the government realized that the campaign had to be transformed into a demand driven initiative than being a supply driven program. The aspect of community support was then felt and thus, the Total Sanitation Campaign launched in the year 1999 was demand driven and also included the aspect of behavior change to sensitize the communities towards the need for sanitation before extending infrastructural support.

Research in development is seen as the starting step of interface with the communities. However, it is not necessary that research enables and ensures generation of community support and consent. One such example is the case of Mewat, a district in the state of Haryana. Mewat, inhabited by a unique ethnic group called the Meo Muslims, is a closed community and has faced years of socio economic and political exclusion due to their ethnicity and geographical location. Largely an agrarian community that till date, follows traditional practices in agriculture, efforts were made by a development organization to introduce modern techniques based on the farm practices. Thus, to devise a sound agricultural intervention program, research was conducted on the land size, land ownership pattern and farming practices. Followed by a series of rapport building sessions, qualitative activities such as timeline mapping to understand the history of agriculture in the region, a quantitative survey was undertaken to capture the aspects mentioned previously. The data collected was analyzed and when collated with the qualitative information was found inconsistent. Further investigations revealed that the farmers did not report the real farm size or the cash crops they grow out of the fear that they will be left out from the subsidy program that was being planned for which data was being collected. On this assumption, the farmers reported reduced farm sizes in the hope that they will fall in the eligible category of receiving the benefits of the program eventually designed. Such instances reflect the subjectivity associated with human responses and how communities can alter the design of the program based on their responses. In this case, inconsistencies emerged due to the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data in the research conducted which helped rectify the emerging trends. The challenges associated with collecting primary data can only be dealt with if the community is made a part of the research process through informing them about the benefits associated with the exercise. However, there are ethical issues associated with partnering with communities and including them in the planning and execution process.

Ethical⁵ dimensions underpinning participatory research emphasize democratic participation in the research process. With the influx of participatory research in aiding development processes, rapport building with the community emerged as a challenge. While participatory tools were employed as ice breaking mechanisms, generating community interest was a difficult task for researchers and development practitioners at large. To garner community support, there were instances where community members were paid if they consented to be a part of the research study. Literature indicates that there is considerable debate on the ethical appropriateness of using incentives in research with human subjects. Research on the impact of incentives suggests that incentives are unethical as they are a form of undue influence or coercive offer (Sugarman & Grant, 2004). In the present day scenario, paying research participants is largely prevalent in clinical research trials. Its presence is hardly evident in development research. In the past, another method of garnering community interest and support was through assuring tangible benefits resulting from

⁵ Literature suggests that ethics in research traditionally cover aspects of overall harms and benefits of research, the rights of participants to information, privacy, anonymity, and the responsibilities of researchers to act with integrity (CSJCA, 2012).

participation. However, the method was not a full proof way of generating interest as the inability to fulfill raised expectations later resulted in the community losing trust. Thus, such methods did not last long due to associated ethical considerations. The next section presents a case study on how research can yield community support and ensure sustainability of an intervention if it is made an integral part of the project lifecycle. While highlighting the role of research in garnering community support, the case study highlights how devising the program with the community and for them can mobilize effective collective action that will ensure sustenance.

4. Transforming Perceptions through Participation: A Case Study

The case study presented here is drawn from the work of S M Sehgal Foundation. The foundation has been working in the villages of Mewat⁶ district of Haryana for more than 15 years now. The primary mandate of the foundation is to bring about holistic village development through instilling a sense of agency and empowerment in the targeted communities. In the year 2011, the foundation launched its community radio initiative with the name 'Alfaz-e-Mewat' on the frequency 107.8. Understanding that effective development can be brought about through amalgamation of community into the design and implementation process, a thorough situation analysis was undertaken before the launch. The situation analysis was conducted with the purpose of capturing the existing situation in the villages where the frequency waves of the radio were estimated to reach. Additionally, the situation analysis was also conducted with the purpose of finalizing indicators to help guide the framework for baseline, monitoring and evaluation. The preliminary groundwork before the situation analysis was initiated, was to map the villages where the radio waves were reaching. To begin with, this was the first step to ensure community ownership in terms of reaching out to only those villages where frequency of radio waves was high enough for the community radio to function effectively.

The situation analysis focused on investigating the routine of households when they would spend time on entertainment, the amount of radio listenership and the information media villagers use to keep abreast with current affairs. To garner community ownership, this step was most important in launching the radio initiative to ensure that the need is transformed into 'felt need' and adequate community interest is generated for community members to gradually become partners in running the radio. Guided by ethical research practices, the respondents in the study were not paid for their participation. The participation was encouraged through informed consent and generating interest through discussions on benefits of community radio. The study revealed that listenership among women was almost zero and the men folk in the villages were also largely listening to radio programs through their mobile phones. Ownership of radio sets was minimal. The indicators hashed out from the findings of the situation analysis such as listenership, usage and expectations from the radio would form the basis for developing the logical framework for assessing impact later.

Parallel to the launch of the community radio, findings from the situation analysis were shared with the community. The purpose of sharing the findings with community members was to make them a partner in the implementation strategy. Taking cognizance of the low literacy levels in the region, findings were shared in the form of flash card presentations that comprised of images to ensure that the communities received the key messages correctly and effectively. Responses from the community members post sharing of findings were interesting, as several participants didn't know that radio could be used as a platform to share experiences and discuss problems. This response emerged primarily from women's groups who then seemed interested in knowing more about the use of radio and its benefits. At the initiation phase of the community radio, involving the community and sharing research findings with them helped generate interest and draw community's attention to the initiative. While discussing the issue of low radio listenership, solutions were triggered from within the community. Women and men cohesively suggested that playing local folklore would help attract listener's attention. Being an agrarian community, they unanimously indicated the need for agriculture related information suited to their geographical context. Such proposals helped the foundation design the broadcasting schedule of the radio in first few months.

Utilizing the findings from the situation analysis that primarily indicated sensitizing communities, especially women to listen to radio, the community radio initiative conducted numerous mobilization campaigns parallelly. These campaigns targeted women in specific. The primary thrust was to sensitize women on the use of radio as an effective source of information about issues that affect their day-to-day lives. At the same time, research findings were also broadcasted briefly through the radio that revealed that women were not using the radio as an information source as against men who were still making use of it. These findings also helped garner more interest among women about listening to radio. Women's views about using the radio were thereafter captured. The findings revealed that select

⁶ Mewat district came into existence in the year 2005. Located 30 kilometers from Gurgaon, the district is untouched by development and lags behind other districts in the state on almost all indicators of growth and development (Saxena, 2013).

women were interested in listening to radio. However, they did not have access to radio sets. Thus, the foundation gave out few radio sets to women who were found especially interested and wanted to actively contribute to the initiative. Having received the radio sets, women sitting in groups listening to radio programs are a common sight in select villages. Persistent efforts to make women realize the benefits of using radio as a medium to not only gain knowledge but also to share experiences has helped garner women listenership. The monthly call record reports now indicate that women's listenership has increased. When the community radio was launched, there were no women callers. However, as on date, analysis of call records over the past six months indicate a ten percent surge in women callers. Women actively call during programs that offer live consultation with experts. They ask their questions either individually or sometimes in groups. These questions usually center around understanding their entitlement on government schemes, obtaining agricultural advice or related to health and hygiene practices. Field explorations suggest that women are particularly interested in listening to programs related to health and hygiene. Women also carefully listen to the agricultural advice made available through programs broadcasted focusing on agricultural practices. This is because they do most of the work on farms from preparing the fields for sowing till harvesting. The information thus broadcasted on the radio is helpful for them to maximize the resources they own. Interestingly, women not only call for asking questions, they also call to share personal experiences such that a larger audience could be benefited. Over time, the extent of participation of women in the radio has increased to the level wherein they physically travel to the radio station located in a remote village, Ghagas in Nagina block of Mewat to share experiences live on the radio and participate in discussions with experts. Such participation has further guided the way for the type of programs to be broadcasted on the radio. The radio station largely operates to cater to the local community. Thus, the program schedule so decided is also based on the suggestions received from callers, live participants and visitors to the radio station.

The surge in interest towards listening to radio and the increase in radio listenership brought in through the strategy prepared on the basis of findings from the situation analysis has helped make the radio initiative a popular medium to exchange information. In today's date, the community radio initiative is a big hit in Mewat villages. The villagers are using it effectively as a source of knowledge and as a medium to communicate their views and problems. Backed with research, the community radio initiative is now reaching out to all target groups, especially women, who, in a community like Mewat are the ones living at the edge. The strategy has further reckoned the role of community members in deciding the content that is broadcasted through the radio that has further ensured that the success of the radio initiative is attributed to the community.

Recognizing other forums where the foundation facilitates collection of women at one place for capacity building sessions or trainings, the idea of collective radio listenership can be promoted. This will help further promote collective action among women and also increase the radio listenership. Women who do not own personal radio sets or mobile phones will also benefit from the idea of listening to radio together. Further, this will also encourage women to interact among themselves, share problems, discuss solutions and also evolve as an action group to bring about positive change in their respective villages. The outreach and potential of the community radio initiative heightened because of the results based monitoring and evaluation system that was followed right from the inception of the initiative. The case so presented is an example to showcase how an interwoven partnership between the community, research and implementation team can help guide the design of an intervention and the framework for impact in addition to ensuring ownership by the targeted beneficiaries securing sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The paper attempts to address two dimensions to development. The first dimension refers to the essence of brining about development, that is, community participation. The second dimension caters to the ways through which effective community participation can be garnered, that is, through participatory research. It attempts to reiterate that for any development initiative to be able to achieve the desired objectives, it is imperative for research to be its backbone. Mapping the evolution of development research over time, the paper also showcases how through time, research has also undergone massive transformation from capturing a third person's perspective to being as participatory that research participants evolve to become research partners. Analyzing varied experiences obtained through literature, it is important to highlight that generating community interest and ensuring its participation has associated ethical considerations. The paper highlights that the subjectivity associated with human behavior and the dynamic nature of communities have to be addressed through research. To achieve this, it becomes necessary that research becomes an integral component of the project life cycle to serve as an effective rapport building mechanism and can also report perceived progress and beneficiary response over time.

For any development intervention to succeed, it is necessary that the intervention is designed by the people for whom it is meant through appreciating their understanding of the solution. This helps shift the onus to the beneficiaries to

ensure the sustainability of the intervention. The starting point in the development process is research which ensures that the interventions so designed are a precise reflection of the communities' felt needs. Thus, for development to be not caught in the vicious cycle of unending and disengaging efforts, it is essential that the approach to development is transformed from being either 'top-bottom' or 'bottom-top' to being 'bottom-bottom'. It is only when communities will feel a need for a solution, will they rise up to demand and participate in bringing about transformation.

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