

**ARTICLE**

## **Critical reflections on participatory action research for rural development in Iran**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Critical reflections are presented from two pilot participatory action research (PAR) projects in rural Iran that aimed to improve communication between state development workers and male and female rural extension workers, and to increase participants' knowledge of participatory communication and their gender awareness. The research team adopted the perspective that people cannot be developed, they can only develop themselves. One of the main findings was that critical gender analysis is valuable in relation to all participants, including the research team. This is important in a predominantly patriarchal system. Conducting this ongoing PAR has been very challenging in a society with a centralized hegemonic structure, where participatory research is very new. In this context, achieving authentic participation and communication requires patience, commitment and sacrifice on the part of action researchers. Despite this, the project has changed the attitudes of rural extension workers and bureaucrats towards a more participatory decision-making process.

### **KEY WORDS**

- action research
- extension
- Iran
- participatory action research
- rural

## Introduction

This article presents critical reflections on and findings from two pilot participatory action research (PAR) projects conducted in the Freidan and Miankoooh areas of rural Iran in which I have been involved since 1999. These projects had two main aims: 1) to facilitate and improve communication between state development workers and rural male extension workers (RMEWs) and rural female extension workers (RFEWs) employed by the Ministry of Jihad for Agriculture (MJA);<sup>1</sup> and 2) to create a learning forum for all participants which aimed to increase their knowledge and understanding of participatory forms of communication and their gender awareness and sensitivity. Rural extension workers are contact people for the rural community and farmers who are usually selected by development workers based in various MJA departments.

This article is based on my experiences as a development worker and researcher with the MJA and my reflections on these two action research cases as the main facilitator and research team leader. These two participatory inquiries are a continuation of my doctoral study which identified the factors affecting participatory rural development in Esfahan, Iran. My thesis indicated that communication between development workers and rural extension workers was weak and mainly involved the one-way communication of technical information. After I completed my PhD in England in 1998, I resumed my position as an action researcher with the MJA.

This ongoing process of inquiry has now been conducted over a 14-year period and has been my main research activity. While my doctoral study focused more on the role of state extension workers, the two pilot projects reported here were designed and facilitated as a two-way communication model for rural extension workers and state development workers. Through this ongoing research, I gradually became aware of my gender-blindness (as a male development worker), and that of other development workers employed by the MJA. My research found that there are proportionately fewer female development workers and RFEWs working in the MJA, compared with males. Overall, it seemed that the situation of women in the MJA and in rural areas had been overlooked.

Previous Iranian studies have mainly assessed the impacts of programmes conducted by rural extension workers on the diffusion and top-down transfer of knowledge using the standard extension approach (Mirzaee, 1990; Rezvanfar, 1992). These studies have usually examined rural extension workers as key community contacts and agents who receive knowledge from senior extension officers in head office using a one-way communication process. However, much less attention has been paid to rural extension workers as local facilitators from the perspective of participatory rural development theory which also includes gender analysis.

As the main facilitator of the two pilot projects, I have found the experi-

ences and outcomes, and the learning process involved in this post doctoral research period, at least as enlightening and fruitful as my formal PhD study. I have become more gender-sensitive and gained significant insight into the structural barriers to achieving transformations in communication and attitudes. Conducting these two action research projects in the complex patriarchal and hegemonic reality of present-day Iran has provided many valuable lessons. I have gradually realized that such a complex context is challenging and that the more you are involved in this research work the more you realize its complexity. This will be discussed in more depth later in this article.

Following some background information on the project and the MJA, the gender-sensitive approach to participatory rural development that the research team adopted in the project is outlined, along with the participatory approach we took to communication and action learning. Case studies of the pilot PAR projects are presented, followed by details of further PAR activities undertaken in 16 other districts of Iran with key stakeholders, including the heads of extension departments and the Bureau of Women's Affairs in the MJA. An analysis of the impacts and effects of the project on various groups that were involved is then outlined. This is followed by some critical self-reflections on the project and an analysis of the micro- and macro-factors and barriers that present major challenges to undertaking this type of participatory research in Iran. Conclusions and further critical reflections are then presented.

One of the main conclusions from this research is that successfully improving communication among all the stakeholders in rural development projects and increasing gender equality requires changes in the bureaucratic structure and in the formal and non-formal educational system. The transformative education of development workers and the rural community is difficult within a relatively top-down and centralized order. However, this participatory research may have paved the ground for changes in these systems.

## **Background to the pilot projects**

Despite statistics showing that significant rural infrastructure has been constructed, the country is still witnessing massive rural out-migration. While infrastructure for services such as electricity and potable water have been built, less attention has been paid to rural people's real priorities such as employment. Thus, large numbers of rural youth are migrating to cities to find employment but are often failing to find a decent job. As a result, rural communities in Iran have high proportions of women and elderly men.

The MJA has adopted a paternalistic approach to development in which it took on the role of 'guardian' of the rural population. As a result, the rural community was dependent on the MJA's development workers. These development

workers have mainly carried out their projects 'for' people with little participation from people at the grassroots community level. Even when participation was mentioned, it mainly referred to people's contribution of physical labour and money, rather than their capacity to actively contribute to planning and decision-making (Kamali, 2003). The MJA has therefore overlooked the significant potential contributions and knowledge of the local community.

Due to the power of patriarchal hegemony in Iranian society, the dominant focus of development has been on men in rural areas and development projects have been mainly conducted by male development workers. RMEWs are mainly involved in issues such as animal husbandry and activities related to natural resources while RFEWs are mainly involved in areas related to domestic or household economics, such as poultry, health and rural handicrafts. There are proportionately fewer female development workers and RFEWs working for the Ministry. The inequitable situation of women in the Ministry and in rural areas has therefore been overlooked and women's contributions and participation in development projects have been neglected.

Before undertaking the two pilot projects in Freidan and Miankooh, the research team conducted a case study of factors affecting two-way communication between development workers and rural extension workers in Freidan county (Kamali, 2002). The findings from this case study and the inquiry process we adopted formed the basis of the pilot projects reported in this article. During the course of this research, we found that communication among development workers and with RMEWs and RFEWs was weak and mainly one-way. This has arisen, in part, because the various MJA departments (such as the veterinary office, the natural resources office, and the extension bureau) and their development workers plan their projects with little coordination from other departments and rural people.

Most of the local farming community did not know their local rural extension workers, who mostly acted as agents for the MJA rather than being the local people's representatives. This was mainly due to the fact that the rural extension workers were often selected by the development workers rather than elected by the farmers in each village. Moreover, the rural extension workers' education from the development workers mostly involved the one-way transfer of technical knowledge on topics such as animal husbandry and preserving natural resources. They learned little about community engagement, participation and facilitation.

## **Participatory rural development**

Development practitioners such as Chambers (1997) are critical of projects in which development workers and their agencies treat local community members as if they are the objects rather than the subjects of development. In this paradigm,

decisions are already made for development workers by bureaucrats in government departments in capital cities, and in other nations operating within the global economic system (Bryant & Whyte, 1984). However, research shows that genuine development can only be sustained through people's active involvement as the subjects of their own destiny. As Nyerere (in Carmen, 1993) argues, people cannot be developed; people should only develop themselves. Chambers (1997, p. 2) suggests that this process starts with development professionals:

It asks about failures, errors and learning, about what we do and do not do, and how we can do better. The argument is that we are much part of the problem, that it is through changes in us that much of the solution must be sought.

Changing rural people therefore firstly demands that development workers and professionals change. However, my experience indicates that the process of changing the local community is very interrelated with the changes that development workers need to undergo. The ideal is that both parties learn from each other and both simultaneously change through a process of mutual communication. This requires development workers to sit down, listen and learn with the so-called 'target group'. The real challenge in development is therefore change itself. As a result, the current priority in the development debate is on how and who should change. As Ledwith (1990) argues, this new paradigm needs change and adaptability in its genes. For nothing is permanent but change. The challenge in this new paradigm is how one can learn and act in a process of ongoing change of all stakeholders.

PAR can effectively facilitate this process of change if it paves the ground for a learning forum for all involved (APO, 2002). In contrast to the traditional research paradigm, action research enables people to devise action plans specific to their particular problems (Stringer, 1996). Moreover, the traditional research paradigm 'largely fails to penetrate the experienced reality of people's daily work' (Stringer, 1996, p. 6).

Within the MJA, there is a tangible separation of the researcher from the researched and many research reports bear little relationship to rural people's real lives. There is little interaction between researchers and the community, and the community's research agenda is not the priority. The situation of rural people does not therefore benefit from this research. However, conducting participatory research in Iran is not only difficult but not valued or appreciated by the dominant research community. The value and validity of participatory research and development is questioned by both the MJA bureaucracy and the higher education system, where students are mainly taught quantitative rather than qualitative and participatory research methods. As Freire (1972) argues, education is not neutral. It is either transformative or it maintains the status quo.

## **Participatory learning and communication**

Experience in both agriculture and industry shows that development workers often learn from each other more than from relevant experts and educators (Whyte, 1999). However, there is little acknowledgement of the value of peer group learning and it is often assumed that development workers should learn from senior staff and outside experts. Even when peer group learning is mentioned it often means senior officers in head office teaching field workers using a vertical communication process that involves the one-way transfer of knowledge to passive recipients. This is more of a process of knowledge dependency and monopoly than learning.

From the beginning of the pilot project, I attempted to treat the development workers and rural extension workers who participated in the project as co-researchers. I also aimed to facilitate a participatory learning cycle as a process of two-way communication for all involved. Based on the pioneering work of Freire (1972), the research team attempted to integrate research with education and action. Freire argues that liberation is praxis: the action and reflection of men and women on their world to transform it. This implies that people must be the subject of change in their own life, not the object of others' thoughts and action (Freire, 1972). Indeed, as Maguire (1987, p. viii) argues:

the inquiry should itself be educational and empowering for participants; outcomes should include an action on attitudes and structures that inhibits self-worth, social justice or liberation. So here the criteria of successful research relate more to empowerment or social justice than to increased efficiency or generalizable knowledge.

This learning cycle has been referred to as action research, participatory action research, and participatory learning and action. Fals Borda (in Rahman, 1993, p. 75) suggests that PAR might be the most useful term, making the point that 'we are talking about action research that is participatory and participatory research that unites with action'.

## **A gender-sensitive approach to development**

In undertaking these pilot PAR projects, my aim was to carry out an inquiry that was participatory, gender-sensitive, and a learning process for all participants. However, like Maguire (1987), during the course of conducting the pilots, I gradually realized that gender issues are not, and should not, be limited to women, and that men's attitudinal change in relation to gender should be considered on a par with women's issues. Moreover, I discovered that patriarchal power still persists even within this alternative participatory research paradigm

(Maguire, 1987). This is a particular challenge in the Iranian context where patriarchal hegemony is deeply embedded in social, ideological and cultural norms. If a more just and equitable society between the sexes is to be achieved, it is necessary for men to be involved in the process of learning and change (Mosse, 1993).

Furthermore, gender justice and learning was seen as not only of benefit to rural people, but also part of an organization's change and learning process (Callenius, 2005). Organizations integrate various values, views and experiences, and the quality of an organization's activities improves when all its strengths and capacities are utilized. As Callenius (2005) suggests, teamwork between men and women in different levels of an organization can have an incredible impact on the quality of its activities and services. It can also pave the ground for mutual learning between development workers within an organization such as the MJA. Men and women can learn about many significant issues from each other, provided that those involved are willing to learn and to value each other's knowledge.

## **Development and implementation of the pilot projects**

Having completed my PhD studies, I began working in the MJA's Rural Research Center in Tehran and selected a research topic which was a continuation of my doctoral study. I contemplated conducting an action research project focused on rural extension workers with my previous colleagues in Esfahan, where I had been employed as a development worker in the MJA's Rural Education Bureau. I shared my research objective with relevant development workers involved in the rural extension workers programme. Based on the earlier case study of factors affecting two-way communication for rural extension workers in Freidan (Kamali, 2002), I proposed implementing a PAR pilot project in Freidan county in the Esfahan province in central Iran. Following some preparatory meetings with my colleagues in Esfahan, all of them agreed with my proposed project. They were interested in cooperating with the inquiry as co-researchers and eager to learn through the PAR process. The research team was gradually formed in Esfahan and later other members from Freidan county joined us. I submitted a proposal to conduct this pilot project to the Rural Research Centre and, following some bureaucratic procedures, my proposal was accepted.

These pilot projects began in 1999 and were conducted over a period of nearly three years. Our plan was to carry out the pilot project and undertake an analysis and assessment of its findings throughout the implementation of the project. The aim of these participatory pilot projects was to facilitate and improve communication between the development workers and the RMEWs and RFEWs. Our aim was that the pilot project would be a learning forum about participatory communication and gender-awareness for all participants, including extension

workers and community members at the grassroots level, development workers from the field up to the national level, and heads of sections at the national level of the MJA bureaucracy.

These two pilots were carried out with the cooperation of two extension workers teams as co-researchers within the MJA. These two research teams were formed for the rural male extension workers and the rural female extension workers in the Esfahan and Chaharmahal provinces respectively. The teams included extension functionaries from the district up to the national level. My role was the main facilitator for these two teams.

We planned to include both RMEWs and RFEWs working in Freidan in the project. Since there were no female development workers in Freidan, it was difficult to conduct the RFEWs project there. We therefore decided to hold this component of the project later on. However, one day a group of female development workers from Chaharmahal province and headquarters visited Freidan. Following their participation in a workshop for RMEWs, they proposed having some RFEWs stationed in Chaharmahal. I accepted this proposal and visited Chaharmahal to hold further in-depth discussions with local development workers. Both the male and female development workers in Chaharmahal were enthusiastic and they volunteered to implement the RFEWs' pilot project there.

After some preliminary meetings with the relevant development workers in Chaharmahal, we gradually formed a new research team to carry out the RFEWs' pilot study in the Miankooch district, in parallel with the Freidan pilot. However, the Miankooch pilot was different from the Friedan pilot since there was a balance of male and female development workers in the research team. This provided us with a good opportunity to undertake an analysis of relevant gender issues.

## **Case studies of the PAR pilot projects**

The following case studies provide details of the PAR processes used in the two pilot projects in Freidan and Miankooch, the participants and stakeholders involved, and the main outcomes of these projects.

### **The Freidan case study**

The initial aim of this pilot project was to implement and study a process of two-way communication between farmers and all development workers, particularly MJA extension workers in Freidan, through improving the existing rural extension workers programme. In the first year of the project we formed the research team and examined the existing rural extension workers' role and activities using a participatory method. After this stage was completed, the team decided to run a pilot in the Boeen-va-Miandasht (Miandasht) district in Friedan county.



Twenty-seven villages in this district were selected for the pilot. A meeting in each of the 27 villages was conducted with farmers to hear their views and, finally, they elected a local extension worker for each village. This was the first time that farmers had directly elected their own representative in their own village. Previously the rural extension workers were selected by development workers with some consultation with village councillors or local trustees.

Following these initial activities, the new RMEWs were invited to attend the first one-day workshop. From the beginning, the research team attempted to facilitate rather than to teach, using a process that was the opposite of that used in meetings with the previous RMEWs, which had mainly used one-way communication to transfer technical knowledge. The research team agreed that if two-way communication was expected between the rural community and the new RMEWs, it should be practised from the outset in our own gatherings and workshops. However, while we attempted to facilitate more and talk less, it was not an easy task. Changing attitudes and habits takes time and evolves gradually, it does not happen overnight.

After 18 one-day workshops, three (three to five day) workshops and two educational visits, which involved exchanging views with RMEWs working in other provinces, we saw a gradual change in the RMEWs, the extension officers, and the workshop co-facilitators who were our co-researchers. However, it was not only the RMEWs who were changing; all of the research team, as development workers, were simultaneously changing. We became aware of the negative impacts of our past activities on rural people, and realized that rural people have valuable ideas and opinions. We practised listening to the people and we were all learning to be open, transparent and assertive. The rural participants developed more self-confidence, and could more easily discuss issues with the development workers and authorities. We were learning to be friends rather than rivals in the process of rural development.

We concluded that these attitudinal changes can pave the ground for improving life in all of the villages involved. Local initiatives were developed, and there was more grassroots participation and people demanding their rights. Such actions can be considered as cornerstones for their sustainable development. An example of this change is the first meetings we held with officers from the natural resources office and RMEWs. The development workers treated the farmers as grasslands ‘destroyers’ and conversely, the local people viewed the development workers as police officers. A serious argument erupted in one meeting and I had to interrupt the discussion. This mentality has gradually changed and they can now communicate better with each other.

A process of continuous participatory monitoring and evaluation was undertaken during the whole research period, using a variety of methods. In addition, several focus group discussions were conducted with the RMEWs and relevant development workers in Freidan. A summary of these discussions is now

presented to demonstrate some of the effects of the project on the development and extension workers in the Friedan area.

Making a comparison between the pilot project and the previous one, one of the local facilitators commented that: 'Our activities have now expanded and we feel more responsibility. The veterinary's office had no coordination with us in the vaccination project before'. Another RMEW explained that: 'At present if a herdsman faces a difficulty, he comes to us first. If we can help him we will do so, otherwise we will introduce him to the veterinary's office'. This indicates that farmers have accepted the RMEWs as their elected representatives and they now come to the RMEWs about their problems and for consultation. Moreover, communication between the veterinary and natural resources offices and rural people have improved via the RMEWs. Through our participatory workshops, we have facilitated communication between RMEWs and development workers in the area (Kamali, 2004).

Some of the development workers involved in the project also pointed out that: 'The RMEWs were not included in our activities in the past, but they can bridge the gap between the state and the local community'. Another development worker went on to say that:

This pilot has had a crucial impact on people's education regarding spraying and having better stables and in changing local bad habits and customs in the area. Despite the recent drought in the area, we are witnessing fewer animal losses and better quality milk.

One of the other development workers commented that: 'Coordination and cooperation among relevant local organizations, such as the vet office, the natural resources department, the health department and farmers' cooperatives have improved in this area'. Both the RMEWs and the development workers thought that this project should continue the PAR process to achieve better outcomes in the farming communities (Kamali, 2004).

### **The Miankoooh case study**

Our original intention was that a rural female extension workers action research pilot project would be simultaneously conducted in Freidan county to facilitate women's empowerment. However, as explained earlier, due to a shortage of female extension workers in Freidan and Esfahan, we decided to carry it out in the Miankoooh district of Chaharmahal province instead. As discussed earlier, during meetings with the Chaharmahal development workers we discovered that there were several eager and capable development workers who were keen to run the RFEWs project in their province.

A new research team was formed to conduct this pilot project in Chaharmahal, consisting of male and female development workers from the

county up to the national level. After some initial meetings among the research team in Chaharmahal, a decision was made to carry out the project in the Miankooch district with 25 villages. Activities that were very similar to those conducted in the Freidan pilot project were implemented, including electing new RFEWs in the 25 villages, holding workshops in each village, and conducting focus group discussions.

Compared with the Freidan pilot project, the research team was more gender-balanced and it also included development workers from different tiers of the MJA. This pilot was again a learning forum for all of those involved. Gender issues also had a greater focus for this new research team. Through this pilot project, the research team became more sensitive to the situation and activities of rural women and female extension officers in the MJA. The research team was not only facilitating rural women's empowerment, we were also empowering ourselves through the PAR process.

We simultaneously focused on facilitating change in others and in ourselves. We firmly believed that it is not acceptable to expect RFEWs to be democratic and have two-way communication with the local community while we were not democratic among ourselves and with the RFEWs. In other words, we did not want to preach participation for others without practising it among ourselves. For this aim to be achieved, the research team decided to focus more on all participants' needs and views. Following 19 one-day workshops, one three-day workshop, and two educational visits, we observed a change in the RFEWs in the meetings and visits we had from people in their villages. They had become more assertive and open, gained more self-confidence and could better communicate with the development workers and local authorities. Their communication with rural women had also improved. Moreover, the seven RFEWs have recently assisted in organizing a literacy campaign as the local adult education teachers (Kamali, 2005).

An attempt is now made to shed some further light on the significant impacts and findings from these two action research projects.

## **Impacts and effects of the project**

In addition to the ongoing participatory monitoring and evaluation in the Freidan and Miankooch pilots, the research team utilized different participatory tools such as focus group discussions, semi-structured dialogue, Venn diagrams, problem trees, force-field analysis and action plans. Our aim in using these tools has been mainly to learn and change, rather than to collect information. These data have been analysed to assess the impacts of the project on the various groups that participated, including the local community members, the RFEWs and the research team (Kamali, 2005). Some of the significant impacts of the project on different participants are now outlined.

When the RFEWs were asked: ‘What are the impacts of this project on your own life and on the community?’, one of them replied:

Since I have become an RFEW and have attended these meetings, my personal and community life has changed. Before this project I was not aware of many issues, but now I have learnt a lot, like proper and effective communication with other people and home economic management.

Another RFEW explained that: ‘My relationship with my husband and kids has improved. I have learnt about other issues such as health, self-confidence and self-value. This project has made a fundamental change in my life’. A third RFEW continued:

We have familiarized villagers with issues such as animal husbandry and vaccinations and we have encouraged women to attend educational courses. At first we did not know the meaning of ‘rural female extension worker’, but now we have realized its value.

A fourth RFEW asserted that: ‘We are more patient and have a better social position in the village. Our community participation has increased and women’s rapport has improved in the community’. Another RFEW pointed out that conflict in her village has reduced since the project commenced.

The research team also used different tools to evaluate the project from the perspective of the development workers who had been our co-facilitators. In response to the question: ‘What are the significant impacts of the project?’, they replied: ‘We have practised participatory decision-making, two-way communication, collective thinking, planning and action in this process’. Another development worker explained that: ‘Our rapport between different tiers (from county, province to Tehran) has improved. We have formed a coherent team’. In response to the question: ‘What are your feelings after three years participation in the project?’ one of them replied: ‘I feel that I know more, and I enjoy being in a team with empathy and common understanding’. Another development worker asserted that: ‘I feel spiritual satisfaction. I am pleased that we practised authentic participation in a small group for a while’.

Another development worker thought that one of the main impacts of the project was the improvement of communication among female and male officers. Female development workers from different provinces also claimed that their rapport with male officers, especially the heads of extension department, had dramatically improved. Their status in the MJA has also increased to some extent.

## Further PAR activities

During the pilot projects, development workers from other parts of Iran visited Freidan to discuss relevant issues emerging from the project. In addition, lessons learnt from the Freidan case were presented to and discussed with other development workers in various workshops which I facilitated in cooperation with other co-researchers working at a national level.

Following the success of the pilot projects, the project was gradually expanded to 16 districts in other provinces in Iran. First, a three-day workshop was organized for development workers from six provinces and some relevant development workers from headquarters. The heads of extension departments in various MJA provinces and from headquarters in Tehran also attended this workshop. This workshop aimed to enable relevant development workers to exchange views about the RFEWs project and to visit the team involved in the RFEWs project in Miankoooh. The workshop used a participatory process, which I facilitated with assistance from my Chaharmohal co-researchers. In addition, we all participated in one of the RFEWs workshops in Miankoooh to observe the process of participation and learning and also to raise some issues with the RFEWs. This workshop was a turning point in the expansion of the project at the national level. After several deep debates regarding the RFEWs project during these three days, all six new provinces agreed to hold a similar pilot in one of their own districts. A decision was also made to hold similar national-level workshops to exchange views between participants.

Five other three-day workshops were subsequently organized in the new provinces. All of the participants and the research team learned a lot from these workshops. After one year, a further 10 provinces were eager to begin projects in their own areas. By this time, the head of the Bureau of Women's Affairs of the MJA Extension Department and some of her colleagues had become research team members and supported the project at a national level.

We also conducted two national three-day workshops for the 10 new provinces. Participants from the first seven provinces agreed to support the 10 new provinces as facilitators. They conducted visits to each other's project locations and exchanged opinions during these visits. In addition, they sometimes invited the national research team members, who were very eager to support and learn from the experiences of the new provinces. Having attended different workshops, visited various provinces and conducted discussions with these 18 provincial facilitators, I found that the female officers were more dedicated, interested and persevering than my male colleagues. This is despite the fact that there are proportionately fewer female development workers in the MJA. This could be because women are relatively more oppressed and they feel greater empathy with the situation of the rural women than men.

### **Some critical self-reflections on the inquiry**

One of the evolutionary outcomes of this humane process of inquiry has been the profound change I have experienced in my own perceptions of research and development. For a long time, I used to work ‘for’ people as a development worker, then I gradually learned to work ‘with’ people, and now I have begun to learn with people, including both women and men. I have also gradually become aware of my earlier gender-blindness and that of other development workers employed by the MJA. Most of the time I have been proud of myself, but sometimes I have become annoyed and felt in despair. The significant challenges involved in achieving authentic participation have made me feel overburdened, locked up, hopeless and depressed at times.

The more I lived and communicated with participants in the cases studies, the more I learned about the complexity of the issues and the challenges of such a process of inquiry. I have realized that the validity of research increases in proportion to the degree of the researchers’ involvement in the actual life of participants and from taking the collective views of participants into account. The research team also discovered that a vertical process of subject–object data collection, which is the main feature of the dominant orthodox research paradigm, renders the rural community and development workers incapable and dependent. It also prevents them from generating their own solutions and initiatives.

Having said this, conducting these action research projects was not as easy as it may appear, given the lack of experience with participatory development and PAR in Iran and other barriers. The participants, including myself as the main facilitator, have faced several crucial micro- and macro-challenges and issues which are outlined in the next section.

### **Challenges to conducting PAR and participatory development in Iran**

As discussed, the process of facilitating this action research project has not been an easy task. The project has not been carried out in a vacuum but rather, it has happened in a real life context. It is therefore subject to a host of macro- and micro-factors that affected its outcomes. Without a thorough analysis of these micro- and macro-factors, there would be no clear insight into the processes involved in the development and implementation of the rural extension workers project. We are living in an interconnected world from the grassroots to the international level and many complex factors need to be taken into account. I have attempted to shed light on some of these factors in this section.

As part of the research, a force-field analysis technique was used with the

research team during which the following factors were identified as barriers to the facilitation of two-way communication between development workers and male and female extension workers:

### **Socio-cultural factors**

- Socio-cultural conflicts and barriers in rural areas, including discrimination against rural people and women;
- Low levels of experience and practice with participatory development projects;
- Non-participatory attitudes at a macro-societal level.

### **Bureaucratic structures, systems and attitudes**

- Bureaucratic barriers in the MJA to conducting participatory projects;
- Inadequate participatory structures for conducting participatory projects in state bureaucracies;
- Negative beliefs and low awareness of several managers regarding the value of participatory rural development;
- Lack of a clear reward system for motivated, committed and creative personnel in the MJA.

### **Gender-related barriers**

- Rural women's low level of literacy;
- Rural women have few opportunities for social activities;
- Women's status in the MJA and in the local community are given little attention.

### **Other barriers and issues**

- Low levels of knowledge of the majority of development workers regarding participatory development;
- Participatory projects take time which is not always available (Kamali, 2005).

Based on my involvement in action research activities in Iran over the past 14 years, and my examination of factors affecting participatory development projects in Iran, the following significant additional macro-factors were identified, from my own experience and perspective:

### *Centralization and sectorism*

Iran has a long cultural tradition of highly centralized government. The planning system is top-down and aims to allocate resources to pre-determined projects via a remote control system. Thus the MJA is not an exception within such a top-down process of planning development projects.

### *Education*

Another crucial macro-factor is the educational system. Students learn to be isolated from the masses and to gain a 'white collar pen-holding' occupation. The education system is mainly based on a one-way process of imparting knowledge, memorization and obedience. There is little room for student creativity. However, today's students are tomorrow's development functionaries.

### *Patriarchy*

The patriarchal system has excluded women from being actively involved in the development process. Male dominance is not only evident in rural areas but is visible in the whole society, as well as in the ministerial offices.

### *Oil as the impetus of dependency*

Oil has caused a situation of socio-economic dualism in Iran. It has undermined the value of work and struggle. Windfall oil revenues have had an immense negative impact on indigenous culture in particular (Kamali, 1998).

### *Hegemonic structure and action research*

Centralization, education, patriarchy and oil have been interwoven to produce a complex hegemonic reality. Within this reality, action researchers face an ethical dilemma. The task of ethical decision-making between beneficence (doing good) and non-maleficence (doing no harm) is not an easy choice, as Newman and Robert (1995) point out. Action researchers therefore need to simultaneously consider the principle of honesty and openness and its possible harmful application. Participatory activities are not valued and welcomed by some managers in the MJA who may see them as a threat. Researchers involved in such activities often face difficulties such as not receiving the promotions that other orthodox researchers obtain. Under such circumstances, action researchers clearly do not feel easy and comfortable.



## Conclusions and further reflections

Over the past seven years the two research teams involved in the pilot projects have reflected on their experiences regarding the role and activities of male and female extension workers. The two participatory pilot projects outlined in this article were conducted to improve and revise the rural extension workers' programme using a PAR methodology. The purpose of this research was to formulate links with and among all the participants and stakeholders who could be seen as being in conflict with each other. The project attempted to facilitate negotiation among all the stakeholders to improve communication and achieve a better quality of life and agricultural outcomes in rural areas. To reach this goal, gender equality was placed at the heart of our inquiry.

One of the significant barriers to this type of research is the existing hegemonic structure in Iran. Under such circumstances, researchers need to fight enemies of which the greatest is ourselves. The enemy is not over there, it is often within ourselves. My task was to facilitate the process of change for others and myself. The research team attempted to reflect on the inequality and differences between men and women. This focus was not only on rural women but also on the female development workers. The predominant attitude in the MJA implies a process of development for men by men. As a male facilitator working within the MJA, I have had to learn to be more gender-sensitive. However, knowledge about gender issues is often totally different to people's actual behaviour in everyday life. There is an invisible power – patriarchal hegemony – which is deeply embedded in social, ideological and cultural norms. This limits women's power and results in women internalizing their subordination and powerlessness. The participants and the research team attempted to understand the gender issues that emerged during the project and to change their attitudes and behaviour towards women, as rural participants and as development workers. Effectively conducted, I would argue that action research can be a useful tool to reveal and gradually deal with such oppressions.

The more I lived and worked with the participants in this continuous learning process, the more I became aware of the complexity and challenges of participatory research and development. In this ongoing process of change everything is changing except change itself. Significant concepts and issues were raised that become vivid in this kind of research paradigm which would otherwise not be possible.

While there were many challenges and barriers, conducting this inquiry has been an experiential and practical learning process for all participants, from the rural areas up to the national level, including the research team. One of our main findings was the value of critical gender analysis in relation to all project participants, especially the research team. This is particularly important in a predominantly patriarchal and relatively centralized system which often propagates the

idea of rural and female inferiority. In order to truly reflect gender interests, the social basis for unequal relations between the sexes in the society needs to be challenged. This in turn demands a transformation of the existing power structure in organizations and at a national level (Young, 1993).

However, while the development workers involved in the project attempted to enhance farmers' participation and communication and expected them to be participatory, they did not always practise democratic processes among themselves, and tended to only promote the concept of farmers' participation. Their actual practices therefore often contradicted what they were preaching. Because some MJA managers still did not treat development workers in a participatory manner, it affected the development workers' morale and their communication among themselves.

Under the existing hegemonic structures in Iran achieving authentic participation is not an easy task for those involved. It is difficult for participants to be open and transparent enough to have authentic two-way communication. It demands high levels of patience, commitment and sacrifice on the part of facilitators, which are not always available. Despite these difficulties, the research team enjoyed being involved in the process of personal and organizational development. This gave us hope to continue on. We have also made many friends from the local up to the national level. However, like other action researchers, although I think I am doing something positive, I have mixed feelings about the impact of the project and have faced some ethical dilemmas.

Despite the tremendous educational impacts of this transformative learning process for many participants, conducting these pilot action research projects has not been easy. While some managers supported the project, others directly or indirectly resisted the action learning process. As an action researcher working in a relatively hegemonic structure, being open and truthful and expecting other participants to act in the same way has created an ethical dilemma. It demands democratic processes and transformative power at the national level backed up at the community level, otherwise this potentially socially transformative process has a very limited effect on participants. Nonetheless, I feel I have experienced mixed blessings and this is, more or less, the reality of many action researchers (Maguire, 1987).

Successfully improving communication among all the stakeholders involved in rural development projects and increasing gender equality clearly requires changes in the bureaucratic structure of the MJA and in both the formal and non-formal educational system. Transformative education is difficult within a relatively top-down and centralized order in a country with an educational system that focuses on memorization and obedience and does not encourage creativity and cooperation. Conversely, this participatory research may pave the ground for changes in these systems. The project has already had some impacts on changing attitudes towards a more participatory decision-making process in the MJA

bureaucracy. In addition, communication among female and male officers in different tiers of the Extension Department in the MJA has improved and the status of female development workers in the MJA has increased to some extent (Kamali, 2005). However, to effectively facilitate change, the ideal process would be simultaneous change from the top and bottom of the organization and in the educational system. Such changes would be effective in facilitating ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ among all the stakeholders involved in rural development in Iran.

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## Note

- 1 The Ministry of Jihad for Agriculture (MJA) is an amalgamation of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Jihad-e-Sazandegi (MJS) which it took place in 2001. Jihad-e-Sazandegi (JS) means ‘struggle for reconstruction’. JS is a non-government organization which was set up by highly motivated and relatively inexperienced volunteers after the revolution. After some time, it evolved into MJS.

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