



2.2 Participatory approaches

As well as referring to a set of methods, participatory research refers to a methodological approach, which is influenced by the attitudes, training and political orientation of researchers.

Core features of participatory research include the following:

- *Concern with relations of power:* emphasis on the perspectives of poor and disadvantaged people and offsetting biases in dominant or outside paradigms.
- *Analysis by local people:* researchers facilitate local analysis in order to learn with and from local people. This requires analysing the process of discussions and interviews as well as the data these produce. Learning takes place face to face and on the spot.
- *Continuous analysis and progressive, systematic learning:* the process of inquiry is cumulative. These approaches favour use of open questions and semi-structured interviews rather than pre-set questionnaires. Joint analysis takes place in several phases and these are context specific.
- *Seeking multiple perspectives:* recognises complexity and looks for diversity of individual and group perceptions to understand contradictions and differences. This can involve purposive sampling rather than statistical sampling for participant selection.
- *Triangulation:* cross checking by using different methods, disciplinary perspectives, sources of information, and entities sampled.
- *Visual medium:* forms of diagramming that are visual and open to groups can encourage participation of marginalised people. By making the process open to those who do not read, are not used to verbal communication or do not share languages, diagramming can have an equalising effect. Visual techniques include mapping, time lines, seasonal analysis, matrix ranking and scoring.
- *Context specific:* researchers are encouraged to use methods flexibly, to innovate and improvise with conscious exploration in different circumstances. No research process is ever the same so there is no blueprint for researchers. The adaptability of methods and possibilities for different sequencing according to local conditions encourages greater sense of ownership.
- *Leading to change:* the process of inquiry embodies a strong capacity building element for local participants, the research team and other stakeholders. Dialogue and joint analysis help to define changes and motivate people to act. Depending on commitment of participants and stakeholders, action can include further capacity strengthening for



implementation of desired changes, or for increased participation in advocacy, decision making and policy development.



2.2.1 Strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches

Strengths

- **Eliciting people's own analysis of their poverty** and wellbeing provides a deeper understanding of dimensions of poverty other than income and consumption indicators. This has potential for identifying key factors of chronic poverty within and between different settings.
- **Understanding complexity and diversity** of livelihood strategies, including the impact of structural economic and political factors over time on people's impoverishment and ability to become less poor. Establishing causality. Identifying barriers to participation, factors of social exclusion and assessing social capital of different groups according to gender, age, caste, ethnicity.
- **Highlighting areas for further detailed research** using other methods and comparative analysis.
- **Adaptability and flexibility** of methods provides potential for working in emergency situations and politically difficult environments, although links with community members and entry points may need to be firmly established.
- **Capacity building** of local people (as well as external researchers) in participatory approaches to research, advocacy and for increased participation in policy development.
- **Influencing policy and practice** - the in-depth and context bound nature of participatory research approaches can provide insights for policy and practical actions with high benefits for poor people in their own terms (at relatively low cost?).
- **'Scaling up'** - The process of participatory research emphasises the linking of information from communities to broader policy dialogue with stakeholders including, CBOs, NGOs, local and national government officers providers, academics, trade unions, business and insurance institutions, international NGOs, donors, UN agencies.

Weaknesses

- **Amount of time required out of the field.** Experience has shown that for effective outcomes, preparation time, (including training and stakeholder identification) and follow up time (including dissemination and policy linking) is equal if not greater than time spent on research activities in communities.
- **Generating statistical data.** Although some methods can produce quantitative data, the focus of the approach is to provide in depth analysis within locally identified contexts. Information generated in participatory research at household level can provide insights to



guide the collection and disaggregation of broader nationally and regionally generated statistical data. See [How to generate statistics and influence policy using participatory methods in research](#) from the Statistical Services Centre.

- **Comparability and generating commensurable information.** Information gathered and shared in different contexts may be hard to synthesise for central planning. However, comparison of findings across a range of contexts can enable central planners to distinguish between policies that are relevant for local and national formulation and implementation.