Chapter 3

Who Speaks For The Community?
Negotiating Agency and Voice in
Community-based Research in Tanzania

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Introduction

This chapter explores an attempt to work in partnership with active local community researchers in Uchira, Tanzania combining Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods with longer-term anthropological approaches. The basis for doing this was to go beyond the quick and dirty application of PRA tools to have a deeper community involvement in the research from inception to final analysis. The project set out to analyse collective village life and in particular the operation and impact of a community-managed water scheme. Through exploring the interaction of structural factors and individual agency in shaping who comes to represent the community, this research built an intensive ethnography of the evolution of collective village processes (Toner 2008). This chapter presents an overview of this research but with a specific focus on the role of local researchers as community mediators and representatives.

The aim was to allow local researchers to be active participants rather than research assistants in an extractive process of data collection. Local researchers were selected and facilitated to gain skills in a range of methods, such as community profiling, life-history interviews, participant observation, transect walks and livelihoods analysis.

The methodology of the research was successful in both building local research capacity and active participation in the research but there were inevitably tensions relating to power, resources and capacity in the interaction, and this chapter reflects further on these.

Two significant aspects of this interaction were methods and money. First, to some extent there was a covert negotiation over methods within the research team which clearly related to the ability and willingness of different researchers to be reflexive and analytical. Second, despite every intention to make the research process as open and participatory as possible, the money for the research came from the UK and was awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for a specific piece of research. Therefore, it was difficult to achieve fully equal relationships with the research team due to disparity of resources and

knowledge and an expectation on the part of the local researchers that the UK researcher should act as a boss.

This chapter explores these tensions further and also examines the evolving relationship of the research team. It considers how knowledge is formed but also the changing nuanced and ambiguous nature of who is an insider and who is an outsider in the research process. Two examples are pertinent to this: first, one of the local researchers who was very critical of local leaders, was framed by them as an outsider; second, I found myself in an ambiguous position in this regard as through the course of the research my own position shifted from being a total outsider: a stranger and a *'mzungu*[1] to becoming the daughter-in-law of the village chairman and often referred to as *Mwenyeji*.[2]

This chapter also considers the question of who speaks for the community? One of my difficulties with PRA is that, despite claims to the contrary, it is often very difficult to see how PRA tools used in short periods of time can capture fully the different voices of the community, considering in particular the dominant discourses and potentially biases of such voices. The research considered the consequences of only capturing those dominant voices which is demonstrated by the community water project that reinforces elite capture and bias despite being a self-proclaimed example of community ownership in action (Toner 2008). The conclusions then reflect on the implications of this interaction for conducting participatory research.

Finding Uchira on the Streets of Cambridge

As an undergraduate student at Cambridge University, I was a member of Survival International, a charity seeking to support the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. Sometime during the winter of 1995 we held a social event in a café on King's Street. Dr Sybil Mbuya, a medical doctor from Tanzania, happened to be among the party. We got talking and she explained that she had completed her medical training in the UK and frequently came to stay with friends in Cambridge. They assisted her in fundraising for medical projects that she conducted in her home region of Tanzania. She went on to explain that recently she had become involved with a UK charity and with them had succeeded in obtaining a grant of £50,000 from the EU in order to sink a water borehole at her new health centre in the village of Uchira. However, the relationship had soured and she was now excluded from the project but was fighting the matter in court.

Having previously spent four months working as a volunteer on an environmental conservation project on Mafia Island in Tanzania and with a strong and youthful urge to do something to assist Dr Mbuya, I immediately offered to go

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1 Swahili term referring to a white person but also indicating power, status and even certain attitudes to timekeeping!

2 Local inhabitant/native.

to Tanzania to investigate the situation under the guise of my dissertation project. This study flourished under the care of Ernest Msuya, a member of the Uchira village council who acted as mentor, guide and translator during this development with key informants working in local government, health and education, as well as with a range of village residents. Copies of this report were sent back to the village council and also to local government officials and Oxfam. A key part of this report emphasized the village council plans for an improved water supply system. Members of the council have told me since that they believe this report helped them to eventually receive funding from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) to provide a gravity-fed water supply. A friendship via letter and later email continued with Ernest Msuya and led in 2000 to the creation of a small organization for fundraising in the UK for projects in Uchira. In 2003 this became a UK registered charity named Village-to-Village. I add this detail here in order to better contextualize the participatory research interaction that later develops. Cornwall's (2003) reflection that PRA is about a balance and a tension between action and observation is pertinent to this. The creation of Village-to-Village was a concrete response of the need to offer action.

I did not return to Uchira until 2002 when a research visit for another project, on which I was employed as a research assistant researching sustainable livelihoods approaches, enabled me to return to Tanzania.[3] That research had left me frustrated as to how little development practitioners and policy-makers actually knew about the impact of their work at the micro level and the untested assertions being made concerning the validity and possibilities of populist approaches to development intervention (Toner 2003; Toner and Franks 2006).

In 1996 Uchira had significant problems with adequate supplies of drinking water, but GTZ had since funded the rehabilitation and expansion of the existing piped water system. This intervention emphasized community ownership and the possibilities for community-based management as a system for the delivery and management of services. Given my already strong links to this village and the availability of some longitudinal data, Uchira seemed to offer an ideal opportunity to further explore some of the questions and frustrations I had with notions of people-centred and bottom-up development, and to explore some of the theoretical ideas which shape current practice.

This study began not with a particular participatory project or intervention, although this is one component, but with the residents of the village of Uchira itself in order to examine the relationship between individual participation, collective action and change in community-driven development. The methodological foundation was an advocated actor-centred (Long and Long 1992; Arce and Long 2000). It recognizes the importance of individual agency in shaping collective

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3 'Goodbye to Projects' was a three year DFID-funded study exploring the application of sustainable livelihoods approaches in development interventions in Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa, for more information see: http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/dppc/research/poverty/projects/goodbye.

action due to the fact that an actor-centred approach acknowledges the negotiation between the individual and the social-economic context in which they live. It also recognizes that actors are only 'partially enrolled in the projects of others' and consequently reinterpret such projects (Arce and Long 2000). Therefore, actors are able through their own agency to subvert and reinterpret external interventions, whether it is globalization or a water supply rehabilitation project (Hickey and Mohan 2004). Some actors are able to exert more agency than others with agency being shaped by 'social networks, lifeworlds and experience' amongst other factors (Lister 2004; Hilhorst 2003). Hilhorst (ibid.) applies this approach to produce an anthropological account of the evolution of a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Philippines. I wished to apply a similar approach to this case study of individuals, collective activity and institutional change in development in Uchira village, the aim of which was to produce an intensive[4] ethnographic account of the interfaces of individual agency and collective action at the micro-level (Sayer 2000; Berg 2004).

Producing an Ethnography of Development and Change in Uchira

Coming from a background of social anthropology my inclination tends towards participant observation as a means of constructing ethnographic research. However, personal circumstances prevented me from following the Malinovskian path of disappearing to the field for a couple of years and re-emerging to produce and construct my account of this time (Malinowski 1922). There is quite an extensive literature detailing the process of adapting and applying the benefits of anthropological techniques to the development field (Okely and Callaway 1992; Pottier 1993; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Moore 1997; Arce and Long 2000; Eriksen 2001; Panayiotopoulos 2002; Bebbington, Dharmawan et al. 2004; CDS 2004; Olivier de Sardan 2005; Booth, Leach et al. 2006).

I wanted to explore a means of producing ethnography through cooperation and collaboration with local researchers and using short but intensive periods of immersion in the field, similar to Booth (2003). The aim in this case is that data and analysis are emergent from this interaction (Gonzalez 2000). However, in practice the co-production of an ethnography with local researchers was not an easy process given differences in background, education and resources, and I reflect on this below.

Once funding had been obtained for research in Uchira I was able to return in December 2003 and recruited Ernest Msuya, my guide and instructor in 1996, to work with me. My idea was that we should work closely together during my

4   I use the word 'intensive' in the sense that this is a focused study of one particular village, as opposed to an extensive study that might compare a number of villages. This draws on the distinction between 'intensive' and 'extensive' research employed by Sayer (2000).

periods of residence in Uchira, but that he would be able to continue with the fieldwork when I was back in the UK. Ernest's knowledge of the local political scene and his good connections enabled him to negotiate the acceptance of this research locally. However this also meant that I was to some degree dependent on him and his networks. If people wanted to talk to me very often they would first approach Ernest to ask him to facilitate this, and he seemed to enjoy this role as gate-keeper cum minder, but it did come to cause tensions.

Ernest initially wanted to undertake all of the data collection on his own and I had to persuade him that the size of the project would necessitate some additional assistance. As my own networks in the village were poor at that time I asked Ernest to find two suitable secondary school leavers to assist us. We discussed that they should be of different genders and religions so that we could not be seen to be biased towards any group, although this hope may have been slightly naïve.

Whilst it was my intention to allow the research to be actively shaped by the local research team, it was unavoidable that I would be imposing many of the parameters on the work. I wrote the research proposal, secured funding in partnership with colleagues in the UK and paid the salaries and in that sense such a partnership is by definition unequal (Erikson Baaz 2005). I was required and expected by the research team to act as the boss, and they made it clear that they wanted clear guidance and structure; something I now think reflects the hierarchical culture of village life in Tanzania. The team would even say to people, as they introduced me, 'our boss is in town', but our relationship was always relaxed and friendly. This also has echoes of the reinterpretation of PRA noted by Fiedrich (2003) in which he recounts how PRA was delivered by one trainer in Uganda as a more linear and structured process than intended but in a manner which better fitted the 'hierarchical codes of power in Africa'. Whilst I had the power in terms of paying salaries and guiding research questions and activities, the local researchers still held considerable power over me in terms of who they could decide to interview, what questions they would concentrate on, what methods of data collection they preferred, and how they would transcribe and translate data. However, this diminished as my command of KiSwahili improved.

As a research group we also began to take on a more active agency in the village through repeated engagement with local officials and the staff of the Water Users' Association. This also shaped the research to some extent. For instance, it kept being repeated during interviews that even the poorest in the village could afford to pay contributions to various organizations, be it primary school or membership fees for the Uchira Water Users' Association (UWUA). This led us to conduct livelihoods interviews with selected respondents that we classified as have-nots, those who are getting-by and the big-shots. The analysis of these interviews allowed the local researchers to respond to officials making such comments, who in return often produced more considered responses. This follows a reflexive dialogical model embracing the interplay of theory and practice; as well as structure and agency (Mikkelsen 1995).

During my period of contact with Uchira my status and relationship with the community evolved considerably. In 1996 I was a young student pursuing a first degree on a youthful mission to change the world and by 2007 I was married to the son of the current village chairman. Whilst having become less of an outsider in the village neither am I fully an insider, although my changing status and increasing language skills have allowed me growing access to the dynamics of family and collective village life in the course of this period. During the fieldwork people tended to see me as 'that Mzungu who got some money from people in the UK to build a health centre', referring to the work of Village-to-Village, the charity of which I was Chair of Trustees. Mention of the health centre often seemed to encourage people to agree to be interviewed and Ernest liked to use this in his introduction of me rather than emphasizing my status as an academic. He wanted to reinforce that I was giving something to Uchira and so people should give their time for the research. Therefore, I can make no pretence of being a neutral outside observer of village life. I am part of networks of family and civil life in the village, and actively engaging in processes of collective life. This chimes with the reflections of Swantz (2003), also on her engagement in Tanzania, when she says 'I did these things as a member of the village'. She is clear that this type of research necessitates that it is also has an action-oriented role.

Multiple Methods of Data Collection

Several methods of data collection were employed in the course of the research in order to generate the range of information required to answer the research questions. For instance, in order to further understanding of the local-national institutional relationships and to construct a profile of community-life in Uchira, semi-structured interviewing, supported by the collection of documentation, was undertaken with a range of key informants. Intensive social research techniques including interpretive biography: life history interviewing and diagramming, autoethnography: local interpretation through diary keeping, observation and analysis, in-depth interviewing and participant observation were used to make inferences about the influence of individual agency in collective action, and in turn the shaping of change.

Additional methods were used to study the process of institutional evolution in the UWUA including process documentation, institutional mapping, participant observation, interviewing, and a review of institutional records and documents. Researchers observed water collection at public water points and collected data on water usage in Uchira, in addition to recording official processes, such as meetings of the water management committee, as well as observing other sites of collective activity in the village such as village assemblies, religious and political meetings, football matches and cultural events.

Table 3.1 presents an overview of the three areas of investigation in this study. As is reflected above, the multiple methods used collected a wide

Table 3.1   Overview of research methods

	Methods	Sampling	Scale	Recording	Strengths	Weaknesses
Individuals	Life-histories	Purposive sample (following community-profiling) according to age, gender, ethnicity and wealth.	41 (2004)	Life timelines Family mapping	Revealed extent of individual participation in collective activities. Provided detail on types of agency used by individuals in shaping their lives.	Interviewees and local researchers needed much encouragement to be reflective and describe more than a simple succession of events. My assumption that reflection is easy and automatic.
	Livelihoods interviews	Purposive sample by local researchers covering 3 categories of well-being.	67 (2004)	Interview notes	Provided a locally-appropriate wealth-ranking used to make sense of how wealth can shape individual agency and collective action.	Estimates of income and expenses were highly inconsistent but the number of interviews combined with the local knowledge of researchers assisted in interpreting this data.
	Peer research	Purposive sample – population under 30, covering range of gender, ethnicity, religion.	25 (2004)	Interview notes	Provided data on how age (particularly youth) shapes individual agency. This group did not respond well to life-history interview by main research team and thus peer research proved more effective.	Data could be quite patchy and unreflective. Additional interviewing of local researchers improved process of analysis. My assumption that local researchers could do this with limited training.
	Participant observation/ Autoethnography	N/a	2004–6	Field diaries	My personal field diary was a vital record of interactions, observations and interviews. Local researcher's diaries and spoken reflections very valuable in interpreting data – particularly where interviews were patchy or incomplete.	Local researchers somewhat reluctant to complete written records and to spend time translating them. Again my assumption that local researchers could do this without more training.

Table 3.1 (continued)

	Methods	Sampling	Scale	Recording	Strengths	Weaknesses
Collective activities: interface of structure and agency	Interviews	Key points – water pumps, dispensaries, church, markets.	200+ (2004/5)	Interview notes	Useful source for community-profiling especially when compared to 1996 interviews.	Notes by local researchers were unreflective and unquestioning. Required further discussion and elaboration for analysis.
	Participant observation	Engagement in political, religious, and social gatherings.	2004–6	Field diaries photographs	Field diary was a vital source of data in this respect but local researchers observations were better accessed through interview/conversation.	Data was very patchy depending on the researchers involved.
Instit. Evolution: processes of change	Process documentation	Key stakeholders – UWUA, Village Council, Ward Office, political meetings.	2004–6	Summary notes	Captured evolution of process of collective action – also allowed us to identify those individuals most able to shape collective actions.	Notes by local researchers could be too unreflective and unquestioning.
	Interviews/secondary data	Key informants in relevant institutions.	Snowball process starting from known sources and repeated on several occasions 2004–6	Interview notes	These interviews often revealed tensions in the implementation and differential understandings of policy. Enhanced understanding of translation of policy from macro to micro level. Such interviews also formed a useful dialogue on findings.	Views and research findings were sometimes sensitive and controversial and dialogue with some actors had to be carefully handled.
	Water point survey	Timed surveys at range of water points.	12/24 (2004)	Charts recording customer details, price paid, consumption, distance travelled	Captured very well local evolution of collection mechanisms, water pricing and motivations of tap attendants. Data provided a good baseline to track evolution.	Water Office used this information to enforce pricing rules without considering implications.

range of data that enabled me to piece together an ethnography of change and development in Uchira. I reflect here on the most challenging aspects: life-history interviewing, autoethnography and longitudinal tracking of village evolution. The most significant challenges in this regard were the need to adapt intensive anthropological techniques to be conducted by a collaborative team of researchers and my lack of opportunity to spend significant periods of time in the field. Similar to Mosse (2003), I think on balance that whilst not being an equal replacement for an intensive and protracted stay in the field, such a methodology proved good enough for the purposes of this study.

Life-histories

Over 40 initial life history interviews were conducted in July/August 2004. The selection of participants tried to reflect a spread of respondents representing different ethnic groups, gender, age, economic status, and religion as identified through the community profiling activities undertaken: key informant and livelihoods interviews. Interviews usually took place at interviewees homes, inside or outside according to the type and amount of seating available in the household. In wealthier homes we were invited in to sit on comfortable armchairs and offered some refreshments. In less wealthy homes we would perch on low stools or any available rocks. Some life-history interviews were conducted at public water points or within business premises. Many, but not all, of the interviews took place in the presence of other family members and we took careful note of who was present in interviews.

Some experimentation with method was necessary. It was found most productive to produce visual timelines of people's lives and generational charts. Some questions advocated in the literature on biographical methods, such as asking people to reflect on the times of their lives when they were most happy (Atkinson 1998), caused bemusement and confusion to interviewees and were dropped by the research team in favour of a more structured approach. This structured approach asked people to reflect on their lives in a chronological pattern, but particularly focused on when and why people had participated in collective activities outside of the family. We also completed family kinship and network charts in order to make sense of kin connections, and linkages within and without Uchira. This revealed interesting data concerning networks of family support but also patterns of migration, employment and marriage. It also highlights how the process of reflection actually requires further explanation as it is not something people automatically do.

Field Diaries and Autoethnography

All researchers were asked to keep a personal reflective record of the research processes. I found a research diary to be an effective means of reflecting on the developing research experience particularly during intensive periods of fieldwork

and in charting my personal relationship with the research which has much in common with McGee (2002). The proposed use of autoethnography was a largely experimental element in the research and intended to examine how local researchers could be facilitated to produce accounts of development activity. Harrison (2000) explores the use of diaries as a research tool in understanding the reinterpretation of development work in a project in Zambia, and this research intended to build on this experience. However, the local research teams were not as enthusiastic and, as discussed above, only Rhoda actually used her diary. The team preferred to reflect on events through stories and gossip. As I became more immersed in the minutiae of life in Uchira I also found that my capacity for interpreting and accessing such gossip increased. I think also that I was naïve to assume that local researchers could, and would, produce critical and reflective questioning and accounts without more intensive support and training to be able to do so. Therefore, many of the weaknesses identified in the table above are not the fault of the local researchers, rather the blame lies with my over expectations of their capacity to do this without more support.

Ethnography is usually thought of as being produced by an outsider. However, in working in cooperation with a team of local researchers there is also space to explore the production of autoethnography produced by insiders (Reed-Danahay 1997). Following periods of training in the research methods local researchers were encouraged to direct and shape the research in response to the issues raised in the profiling, life-history interviewing and organizational mapping. This method also incorporates the local analysis of data. As detailed above a reflexive process of analysis took place during the joint translation of interview data. Ernest Msuya also wrote his own independent analyses in relation to the operation of the UWUA and other aspects of life in Uchira. The capacity for reflection by the research team did grow with time but there were certainly different preferences for the expression of such reflection.

Peer Research

During the collection of data in life-history interviews the reticence of the young to talk openly was noted. Very often they were shy, fearful of not knowing answers or did not appear to have any opinions, or felt that their lives had been short and that not a great deal had happened to them. In discussion with the research team it was decided that a separate study of youth perceptions should be carried out, as it appeared that Ernest's position as an older and well-connected man made younger participants unwilling to express themselves. I had already been approached by a Form 6 leaver with a place at university for some employment on the project and he seemed to be the obvious person to conduct the study. Together we discussed the basis of such a study, selection criteria of respondents and the scope of the questions to be asked. I allowed him some discretion to develop interviews as necessary. He worked over a two-week period assisted by another Form 6 leaver. They undertook the transcription and translation of interviews and also produced

their own synthesis report. This work produced some interesting data on the views and position of younger people in the community. In particular it highlighted tensions within their identities regarding their own perceptions of traditional and modern life. Both individuals involved in this part of the study had higher levels of education and seemed to some degree to be more comfortable with being encouraged to attempt their own analysis and reflection.

Longitudinal Research

One of the opportunities presented in returning to Uchira to undertake this research was the opportunity to consider how the village had changed in the period between 1996 and 2004–5, and to achieve a more complete profile of the community. The 1996 study constructed a basic archaeology of previous and current development activity in Uchira and this current, and more detailed, study offered a rare opportunity to examine what had changed and how during this period. This work also enabled us to identify the linkages between international/national policies and their interpretation and implementation at the local level. Ernest Msuya had worked with me on the original study and therefore we aimed to re-interview key informants and re-visit key locations in order to update the 1996 village study. This enabled us to produce comparative maps of the village in 1996 and 2004 which illustrate changing influences in the provision of services. The 1996 study had also identified several influential individuals within the village and this study re-engaged with them to understand the dynamics of their participation in collective village life.

One of the emergent themes of the research was a need to quantify poverty in the village. Dialogue with regional officials and some UWUA staff and the village council often resulted in denials that some people had difficulties in paying for water or making contributions to village development projects. From community profiling we had already produced a qualitative wealth ranking but as a research team we felt the need to quantify some aspects of wealth. Livelihoods interviews which were semi-structured around questions of income and consumption, then led to a quantification of typical expenditure in different wealth groups. This part of the research facilitated much deeper discussions on issues of ability to pay for services such as water, and demonstrated that some of the very poorest were using up to 30 per cent of their cash income to pay for water, and was a necessary baseline of primary data that informed interaction with some individuals and agencies. Similar dialogical needs are found in the work that reflects on the World Bank Study *Voices of the Poor* (Brock and McGee 2002). However, this also led to some villagers, individuals with power within UWUA, trying to assert that local researchers were not interested in the community and they simply wanted to cause trouble. This again highlights the need to disaggregate the community to understand the power dynamics at play. A short intensive PRA exercise would have difficulty in recognizing such dynamics.

Making Sense of the Data

The process of data analysis took place in two ways: first, as an on-going interaction with the local researchers in Uchira. As mentioned above, this process produced comparative maps of the villages, wealth rankings and descriptive data relating to the evolution of institutions and mechanisms for the delivery and payment of water. All of this data provides a baseline for the more analytical element of this research. The second part of the data analysis involved textual and discourse analysis of interviews. This was based on an interactive and iterative process of coding the data in order to produce a typology: for instance, of differential participation in collective action, and then returning to further sort and categorize the data, before further refining the typologies (Laws, Harper et al. 2003; Mikkelsen 2005). The categories and typologies used to analyse the data are hence emergent from it but also based on existing analytical frameworks. Analysis of data happens on different levels and both interpretation and expression of research findings is a process of negotiation and reflects the positions of the different actors and institutions in a co-production of knowledge. The life-history interviews formed one element of the research but became one of the central points of analysis. Life-histories were recorded in diagrammatic form using a life line that charted significant events in the life of an individual, a family network chart and a range of significant observations and opinions made by the individual during the interview. These charts were then used to identify differential forms of agency that people had employed in their lives using a typology developed by Lister (2004). They were also coded in relation to different social relationships which had enabled or constrained the action of the individual. This analysis offered an insight into how community identity and voice is shaped and also revealed the structural barriers, in particular to the poor, women and young people in shaping their community. However, more significantly it also showed when individuals had been able to overcome such structural constraints. My conclusions from this data which were drawn up in the UK were extensively discussed with local researchers in subsequent visits.

At this point the research became far less interactive; both practically and out of necessity as I was no longer able to spend longer periods of time in Uchira. Therefore, the interpretation of data in the study was largely my own and consequently cannot claim to be a co-production of knowledge with active local researchers. I have come to understand that such a co-production would require a far higher investment of time and resources than was possible in this research. It is also recognition that the research had to be packaged for an audience beyond the village. Knowledge gained from the research has been used locally in building up the NGO 'Village-to-Village' and in challenging some of the problematic aspects of the water project, particularly in relation to the ability of the poorest to pay for water. Beyond the village, the research has an academic and policy audience and requires an exclusive and specialist language. Again to pick up on Swantz (2003), this is not a problem, and it is simply that we are using the language and knowledge that we have to take action on the behalf of others.

Conclusion

This chapter considered an attempt to marry PRA tools with anthropological methods to produce research in a collaborative manner with one village in Tanzania. The experience of this research shows the necessity of not assuming that concepts such as reflection are automatically transferable. It also shows that concepts such as reflection are automatically transferable. It also shows that the relationship and dynamics of the research team and the encounter itself shape the relationship and dynamics of the research team and the encounter itself shape the interaction between researchers and the researched. Absolute equality in the process is an impossibility given imbalances in knowledge, power and resources, and it is not helpful to pretend otherwise. Chambers (2005) has argued on several occasions that we should not instruct too closely but should hand over the stick. This was certainly my intention as I embarked on the research but it was very clear that people may not want the stick, feel it is appropriate that they should have the stick, or have the resources to use the stick.

My own reflection on this period of research finds strong connections with the experience of Swantz (2003) and Cornwall (2003): that research and action should be inextricably linked. However, the process of participatory research and action is not as easy as is sometimes asserted. I tend to agree with Alumasa's (2003) assertion that tools are just tools, and that in this sense participation, and with it PRA, has been commercialized. This is symbolized by the merchants of participation who go from one workshop to another.

Jassey (2003) also makes a vital point that PRA tends to produce similar responses to all problems and I have certainly seen this in previous research (Toner 2003). It is not helpful necessarily to see the poor as experts on their own poverty. This position is dangerous in the sense that it leads to the exclusion of proper consideration of the broader structural conditions that shape poverty.

For me then, the value of PRA and participatory research and action in general is more concerned with a philosophy of respect and humility, a way of accessing specific local knowledge and of beginning a long-term interaction of reflection and action that necessarily must extend beyond the boundaries of a particular community. It is much less about formulas and rules and more about flexibility, creativity, diversity, contextual fit and hybridization (Dale 2004). It is about starting a conversation of many voices, and starting to find ways of enabling those with small voices to be better able to make themselves heard.

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