

IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
Institute of Development Studies

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Who Counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers

This Research Summary shows how Working Paper 296 documents a quiet revolution, unrecognised in professional mainstreams, that has been taking place in the past decade and a half. The paper challenges the common view that participatory approaches and methods are only good for qualitative data, and that statistics can only be generated by questionnaires or scientific measurement. It shows that many participatory methods have been used to produce quantitative data, and that these data tend to be more accurate, insightful and useful than those from questionnaires.

The paper, written by Robert Chambers, a Research Associate in the Participation, Power and Social Change Team at IDS, details how the methods can entail counting, calculating, measuring, estimating, ranking, valuing, scoring, and scaling. They often involve comparisons which are given numerical values. Examples of methods are: participatory mapping and modelling; proportional piling; card writing, marking, sorting and positioning; matrix ranking and scoring; pairwise ranking; linkage diagramming; and pocket voting. Many have elements that are visual and tangible, for example seeds or other counters, and are crosschecked and validated through small group processes.

The methodological pioneers in going to scale in the 1990s rarely recognised the significance of what they were doing. The pioneers of the 2000s have shown ingenuity, skill, patience and courage, sometimes in the face of professional opposition.

Illustrations of significant and remarkable innovations are:

- Participatory surveys based on mapping. In Nepal a survey of utilisation of services used social mapping in over 130 villages. This produced tabulated statistics covering many aspects of households, such as access to and use of services, and data on a population that totalled 35,414. In Malawi social mapping and crosschecking in 54 representative communities indicated a massive undercount, giving a rural population of 11.5 million compared with 8.5 million in the official census.
- Aggregations from focus groups. In Bangladesh, these have revealed and put numbers on the priorities of poor rural and urban women and men; in Jamaica, Guatemala and Colombia, the relative incidence and seriousness of different types of violence; and in the Voices of the Poor study in 23 countries, proportions and percentages for

directions of change in violence against women.

- Participatory analysis of inter and intra community differences. Methodological breakthroughs have been made in Kenya, South Africa, Malawi and China in comparing levels of poverty between communities, and who benefits from programmes.
- The stages of progress method. Anirudh Krishna has developed an ingenious and credible method for identifying pathways out of, and into, poverty, their incidence and their causes, and applied this in six contexts in four countries.
- An innovative participatory module. In Uganda, such a module facilitated with a subsample of the National Household Survey has produced statistics for seven dimensions, including access to services and powerlessness. The findings raise questions about the validity of income statistics.

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The advantages of participatory compared with questionnaire approaches include validity and reliability, insights into sensitive subjects, and unexpected findings. These often have policy implications: for example, in Bangladesh the high priority for poor urban women of a private place where they could wash; and in Malawi, the high proportion of the poorest people who did not receive an input package designed for them. A reasonable rule of thumb is that conventional questionnaires should be used only if no participatory alternative can be devised, or should be used only in a light and quick manner for confirmation and triangulation with other methods.

The question ‘who counts?’ raises questions of ethics and of the mix and balance of extraction, empowerment and impact. Participatory statistics can lead to changes in policy and practice that reflect local realities. Participatory processes can also be extractive without direct benefits to those taking part. Participatory numbers, and participatory Monitoring and Evaluation, can also be empowering and lead to local learning, as would occur with decentralised and locally owned information centres.

The examples, experiences and evidence in the paper point to many potentials: for those in power to be better and more realistically informed and more persuasively influenced; and for those who are marginalised and misunderstood to express their realities in ways which are convincing.

Participatory numbers are a way to get the best of both worlds, qualitative and quantitative. They open up a whole new professional field for exploration, innovation and application. They challenge the mindsets and reflexes of many development professionals. They challenge the practices of influential organisations trapped by inertia, repetition and tradition. For university and college curricula, for textbooks, for teachers, for statistical organisations, for research institutes, for professional training and for development professionals generally, the implications are radical. When will they be recognised and acted on?

Credits

Robert Chambers, ‘Who Counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers’, *IDS Working Paper 296*, January 2008

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