

# Participatory Research: Strategies and Tools<sup>1</sup>

Ajit Krishnaswamy

*Participatory research or PR presents people as researchers in pursuit of answers to questions encountered in daily life. PR is the foundation of the NNFP's National Community Forestry Center (NCFC). An article in Practitioner 20 (June 2003) described how NCFC's regional centers use PR. Since then, there has been a demand for more information on how to conduct PR in the field from practitioners. This article discusses some PR strategies and tools. Most of the tools described here have been used in developing countries that have a longer history of participatory approaches.*

## Introduction

For the purpose of this article, strategies are plans or actions designed to achieve PR goals. These goals are broadly defined as building the capacity of people to conduct and use research. Tools are instruments, activities or methods used to implement a strategy in PR.

Strategies used in participatory research (PR) focus on process and capacity building. In PR, the process of conducting research is as important as the research outcome. The PR process is intended not only to produce useful and sound information, but also to build capacity among the research participants. Capacity building occurs as community members identify research questions, carry out research activities, and in the process develop research skills and techniques. Community members learn to analyze information they have collected and decide how to use this information.

The tools described in this article are models, mostly from developing countries, that can be adapted to different cultural scenarios in this country. It is very important to consider the cultural context before using a particular tool. Culturally appropriate tools need to be designed with greater sensitivity and input when working with Native American, minority and ethnically diverse communities. Some PR tools are the same as might be used in “conventional research”, but they are often implemented differently due to PR's emphasis on participants working together throughout the research process.

## Strategies and Tools Used to Define a Research Question

Strategies associated with the different stages of identifying a research question in PR, and examples of tools that can be used in each stage are described below. These strategies and tools can also be used to address the other elements of the PR process, such as selecting research methods, collection of data, analysis of results, use and dissemination of research results.

The strategies and tools described here are not exhaustive, but indicate the type of group activities that are integral to PR. The heart of the strategies is the emphasis on people

---

<sup>1</sup> Krishnaswamy, A. 2004. Participatory Research: Strategies and Tools. *Practitioner: Newsletter of the National Network of Forest Practitioners* 22: 17-22.

working together, using tools to achieve common understanding on research goals and activities. What really matters is the question “How can we do this work together, and involve everyone who should be involved?”

The stages to identify a research question described below do not always occur sequentially. They often overlap. Also, many of the tools mentioned under a particular stage, can be used at different stages of the research.

### *Stage 1: Clarify purpose of the research*

Before a PR project is started, the research partners (researchers and community members) must have a clear understanding of the broader goals of the research project. It is also important to clarify the goals of the researcher, and how these relate to the goals of potential partners from the community. Without a clear sense of what the research project is trying to accomplish, it will be difficult to design a practical and effective PR project.

**Strategy:** Develop a mission statement. Research partners could develop a mission statement that identifies desired outcomes, and the general strategy of getting there. The mission need not describe details of the research, or specific strategies, as these will be identified through participatory processes. The mission statement should describe the 1) goals 2) general strategy, and 3) values of the research partners.

#### 1. Goals

- what the research is trying to accomplish? For example: the research intends to provide wild mushroom harvesters more information about the condition of the mushroom crop so as to help them have an informed dialogue with the Forest Service
- what type of problems the research is trying to solve? Are they ecological, economic and/ or social? Examples are: the sustainable harvest of Non Timber Forest Products (an ecological problem), forest worker rights (a social problem), and better markets for small-diameter wood (an economic problem)

#### 2. General Strategy

- what is the plan to attain research goals? Will the research involve: organizing meetings, workshops, interviews, or data collection? Will the data be ecological, social, cultural, or economic?

#### 3. Values of the research partners

- what are the ground rules that will guide the research? For example, ground rules can lay out the degree of emphasis on stakeholder involvement, transparency, organizing, capacity-building, and training. Also ground rules can clarify who will own the research results, and how will they be distributed

**Tools:** Strategic Planning. The mission statement of the research can be developed through strategic planning. This planning is most successful when it involves all research partners. A strategic planning meeting could be organized at a time and place where all research partners can attend. This meeting needs to be carefully planned and facilitated.

*Stage 2: Identifying and involving diverse stakeholders in the research*

The second stage in a PR project is to identify “stakeholders” and facilitate their participation in the research. Stakeholders are defined as any person, group, or institution that affects or is affected by the research. They are broadly representative of different interests.

By bringing diverse parties to the PR process early on, chances for a more comprehensive identification of relevant issues increase. This adds to the usefulness of the research. Broad stakeholder involvement is also important as PR builds relationships between diverse groups, and between these groups and professional researchers. PR also intends to enhance the capacity of different stakeholders to mediate their own conflicts, and represent their interests in wider social and political arenas.

In some cases, researchers may choose to work with one group of stakeholders to investigate issues that are relevant to that particular group. NCFC regional centers often work with one group of stakeholders such as forest workers, Native American tribes, and county commissions. In these cases, it becomes necessary to identify all who would be affected by the research question. These could be individuals or groups who are a part of the stakeholder group, and those outside the group.

Stakeholder participation means active involvement right from the conceptual stages of the research and includes identifying the research question, implementing and using the research. It goes far beyond just notifying or informing community members about the research.

**Strategy.** Identify all stakeholders affected by the research. Regardless of why parties choose to be involved, it is crucial that their participation is treated with respect.

**Tools.** Make a list of stakeholders using the following questions.

- Who is affected by the research?
- Are there stakeholders who should be involved, but may need support?
- What support is required and how can it be provided?
- Are political or institutional “change agents” represented?

**Examples of Stakeholders**

Community Members	Environmental Organizations
Landowners	Academic Institutions and Researchers
Local, County, State, Federal Agencies	Commodity Interests
Tribal Governments	Industry and Small Businesses
Mobile and In-place Forest Workers	Recreation and Sporting Interests

Contact the different stakeholders to involve them in the research. Plan how to approach them. Talk to them individually about a general topic of concern. Ask if they'd be willing to meet with others. Use a "snowball method" to find others, that is find information about other stakeholders from the ones that you have talked to.

Make it clear how they will benefit by participating in the research. Use some of the reasons in the box below to explain benefits from participating in the research.

#### **Why participate in the research?**

- Control over how the research affects their lives
- Ownership in design, process and results
- Learn research skills
- Build relationships and networks
- Recognize different perspectives - reduce conflict
- Increase the chances of success and usefulness of the research
- Verify assumptions about the outcome

#### *Stage 3: Building Trust*

Unlike conventional research processes, developing the research question is not the starting point of the PR process. Building trust is a necessary stage prior to developing the research question. Building community members trust in the research process which is so crucial in PR takes a lot of time and patience.

**Strategy:** Create space for informal communication and regular interaction amongst research partners in order to build trust.

#### **Tools:**

- Gatherings in people's homes
- Getting together over food such as potluck meals
- Field visits
- Informal meetings and meetings in small groups
- Training sessions
- E-mail lists and listservs for a greater flow of information

#### *Stage 4: Building Common Understanding*

Once stakeholders are identified, and a degree of trust exists amongst them, the next stage is to build a common understanding. This process, while time consuming, will ensure that all stakeholders have a set of agreed expectations from the research so that they can remain invested in the process.

It is critical to the PR process that all stakeholders are actively engaged in building a common understanding. They should be provided with the opportunity to fully participate, and have access to information in order to do so. If this does not happen, then there is the

risk that some will dominate the research process. Care must be taken to communicate on technical and political levels at which all stakeholders can comfortably engage. Powerful stakeholders can end up controlling the process when activities and information are shared using the language and approaches they have developed. Therefore, an important precursor to building a common understanding is determining the capacity of stakeholder groups to participate in the process.

### Questions to design a process that builds common understanding ·

- Is the language (scientific, cultural terms, English) being used understandable to all?
- Do all stakeholders recognize and respect the different individual and cultural approaches to communication?
- Do some stakeholders require technical or financial support to participate more fully? How can it be provided?

It is unlikely that different groups participating in the research would have similar values and goals. There could be some agreements and some differences over what they expect out of the research. These need to be identified in order to build a common understanding.

**Strategies.** Stakeholders should be encouraged to explicitly spell out their goals so that it is possible to see where they overlap, and where the differences are. The most common strategy is to organize a meeting of stakeholders. The tools described in this section relate to organizing and facilitating meetings. They may not be appropriate for working with culturally diverse communities, and thus may need to be adapted to suit their needs.

For example, when working with wild mushroom harvesters from Southeast Asia in Oregon, I found that they do not like to participate and speak in formal meetings. However after informally interacting with people with other groups, they willingly participate in meetings that include people whom they have got to know and trust. I cannot overemphasize how much sharing meals with them helped build trust.

Once a common understanding has been negotiated, and the stakeholder groups and the researchers agree on the goals of the research, this agreement could be formally recorded. A way to do this is for all participating groups to sign a memorandum of understanding that broadly outlines what the research hopes to accomplish. Though this seems an overly formal way to define a collaborative process, however it provides clarity and may help resolve future conflicts. An example of a formal agreement is that the NCFRC regional centers sign a contract with their partner communities that describe the goals of the research.

**Tools.** There are several different ways meetings can be organized for building a common understanding. For example, invite people with expertise on relevant issues to speak briefly. This could be used to initiate discussions. Also, experienced facilitators could facilitate meetings. When organizing meetings, we should pay careful attention to location and time so

that it is convenient for stakeholders to participate. We should allow adequate time for discussions.

Some of the tools that can be used in a meeting format are:

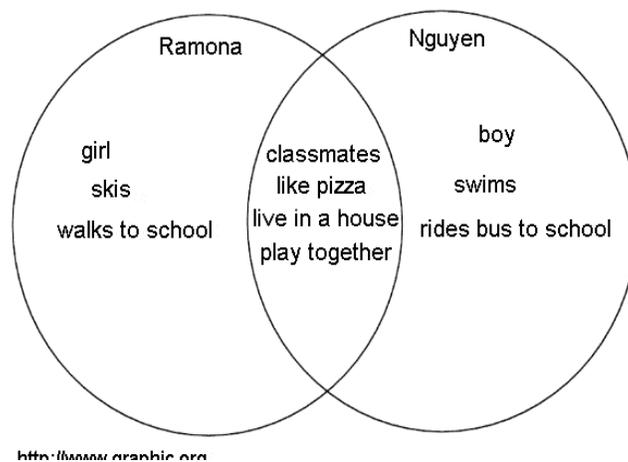
1. Note card exercise – The purpose of this exercise is finding common ground and identifying shared priorities and values. At the beginning of a meeting of stakeholders who are trying to seek common understanding, ask people to fill out cards as they enter: “In five years, I’d like our community to have/be \_\_\_\_\_”. Collect cards; shuffle them; read them out or capture on flipchart. Usually people find they have more vision in common than they thought.

2. Brainstorming creative solutions – This exercise is used by groups of people working on a project to expose their preliminary ideas about the project for all those involved to see.

The key ground rules are

- a) every idea is worthwhile
- b) suspend judgment - no critiques, evaluation, censorship;
- c) capture all ideas for later discussion

3. Venn Diagrams – This method uses diagrams to identify linkages and overlaps in ideas or perceptions. These commonalities are the used to a shared understanding of a issue, problem, or situation. The Venn Diagram is made up of two or more overlapping circles (see example below from [www.graphic.com](http://www.graphic.com)). They are used to describe and compare elements and characteristics of a situation.



To create a Venn diagram to identify a shared understanding of an issue in a group setting, you can follow these steps:

Step 1. Draw three circles which partially overlap and name them A, B and C.

Step 2. Ask group "What are the 3 most important elements of the issue?" Write these three elements in each of the three circles.

Step 3: Ask group “What is common between the elements in Circle A and B, or how can the differences between the elements in these circles be resolved?” Fill in the overlapping area of the two circles with the group’s response.

Step 4. Repeat Step 3 with Circle B and C, and then with Circle C and A.

The overlapping areas now document the common characteristics of the issue identified by the group and can form the basis of shared understanding.

4. Field-based tools for building a shared understanding. Some examples are:

1. Mapping the landscape - gives people a shared “bird’s eye view of landscape. It is useful for arriving at an understanding regarding boundaries, nature and scope potential research projects.

2. Field trips - moves sometimes contentious and abstract discussions based on different perspectives to a concrete, site specific context as a basis for common understanding. It is suitable for field-based research projects such as thinning or harvest methods and their impacts.

3. Citizen Monitoring – involving community members in assessing environmental and/or social change over time. This can be a tool both for gathering critical data, and also for raising consciousness about common problems and opportunities.

*Stage 5: Identify the Research Question or Questions*

The next stage after building a common understanding is to specifically identify a research question or questions. The list of issues or concerns developed during the stage of building a common understanding could be used at this stage. From that list, the research question would be chosen.

**Strategy.** Choose criteria for identifying research questions, and then rank potential questions based on the selected criteria. For example, criteria for ranking could include the feasibility and usefulness of doing research on an issue.

**Tool:** One method for ranking could be the use of Matrices to prioritize amongst identified choices or alternatives. This method could be used if a group has developed a list of possible issues or problems, and they need to prioritize which issue must be addressed first. The group can develop criteria with which to evaluate potential actions. The criteria could include feasibility, time, cost-effectiveness, and ecological, social and economic impacts. Selected criteria could be entered in a matrix to evaluate each potential action. The group then together rates each action relative to each criterion (for example, 1,2,3 for high medium, low). The sum of the ratings gives each potential action a “relative value” or priority compared to the other actions and can help a group to narrow down a long list to a handful of generally agreed upon priorities. The result could be one or several research questions.

**Tools and strategies for other elements of PR such as research methods and use of research results**

As mentioned earlier, the strategies and tools described above to identify a research question in PR can also be used for selecting research methods, collection of data, analysis of results, and dissemination of research results. PR can also use the qualitative and quantitative methods of conventional research, as PR is not a research method, but an approach that

presents people as researchers. However, the difference in applying the methods of conventional research in PR is the emphasis on people working together, using tools such as those described above to achieve common understanding on research goals and activities.

**Additional information about the PR tools described in this article and other tools:**

1. Margoluis, Richard and Nick Salafsky. Measures of Success: Designing, Managing and Monitoring Conservation and Development Projects. 1998. Island Press, Washington D.C.
2. Kaner, Sam et. al. 1996. Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision- Making. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia.
3. Pretty, Jules N. et. Al. 1995. A Trainer's Guide for Participatory Learning and Action. 1995. IIED, London.
4. [www.venndiagram.com](http://www.venndiagram.com)

**Acknowledgment:**

Many of the PR tools mentioned in this article is from material presented by Yvonne Everett (ye1@humboldt.edu) at a training on Participatory Action Research at the Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program's Annual Workshop, Seabeck WA in September 2003.