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The Role of Reflexivity in Participatory Action Research to Empower Culturally Diverse Communities in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article presents a real-world application of participatory action research (PAR) for effectively working with culturally diverse communities in Pakistan, based on a two-month project conducted with seven community-based organizations (CBOs) in one of the districts of the Punjab province in Pakistan. My process of transforming from a top-down approach to a PAR approach was grounded in critical self-reflection, observation, and reciprocal interaction. This transformation process increased my ability to understand community context and appreciate local knowledge, which in turn fostered collaboration, engagement, and collective learning. Although applying the PAR approach was not without challenges, complexities, and tension, it did result in local development. Hence, this paper explores the possibilities of PAR as an alternative approach to be considered by development agencies in their work with community partners.

Keywords: reflexivity, participatory action research, culturally diverse communities, community empowerment

1.0 Introduction

Researchers have found that traditional top-down approaches to development—that is, a process of growth and satisfaction within a community—are largely ineffective because they do not take into consideration community context (Daiski, 2008) and lack community knowledge (Zorondo-Rodriguez et al., 2014). Such approaches limit collaborations and coalitions with target communities and fail to adequately consider community issues (Dirix, Peeters, Eyckmans, Jones, & Sterckx, 2013).

Although many development agencies have improved their communication strategies with community partners to address community needs through their projects (Hofstede, 1997), most still follow top-down approaches (Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015). Development agencies refer to non-government organizations—at the local, provincial, and national levels—which focus on certain issues such as education, health, and women’s rights, and work towards solutions by using various interventions and targeting specific groups—communities (Raza, 2018). That is, development agencies often use models of communication and dialogue with local communities that do not consider population diversity and cultural context (Pieczka, 2011). Instead, they ‘collaborate’ with community partners to implement the development agency’s predetermined project objectives rather than using a culturally appropriate and participatory process to engage community members (Huesca, 2008).

By contrast, bottom-up approaches (Hill & Rapp, 2014; Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002) engage community members in the decision-making process and consider local contexts (McCarthy, 2014). The focus of these participatory approaches is to educate communities in order to empower them to carry out their development projects with subsequent monitoring and consistent feedback (Cahill, 2007; Funnell, 2004). Such action-oriented approaches to engage and empower communities have yielded successful results for community-based development projects (Gilhooly & Lee, 2017) while also creating sustainable changes among individuals, groups, and communities (Khan, Bawani, & Aziz, 2013).

The core of bottom-up development approaches is to engage community partners and integrate local perspectives through reflection and participatory actions, such as allowing community members to participate in the decision-making process and encouraging them to express their views about the effectiveness and meaningfulness of the proposed interventions. Additionally, while community members participate in the decision-making process and share their experience about the project in which they are engaged, development agencies should be receptive to accepting and incorporating community feedback. This process of considering community knowledge and local expertise builds trust among community members and ensures their active engagement in project interventions which, in turn, results in the effective implementation of development projects (Dunet & Reyes, 2006; Jacobson, 2003).

This paper illustrates a real-world application of participatory action research—a bottom-up approach—during the process of transforming from a top-down to bottom-up approach in a two-month training and evaluation project of seven community-based organizations in District Muzaffargarh, Punjab province, Pakistan. My journey of shifting toward a PAR approach was comprised of continuous observations, reciprocal interactions, and self-reflection. Particularly important is the role of reflexivity in guiding this transformation. Despite numerous challenges, complexities, and tensions, reflexivity helped me eliminate power hierarchies as I changed my role from an expert to a co-learner who collaborated with community members in the construction of knowledge through a collective learning process. This process resulted in local development.

2.0 PAR Framework

2.1 PAR in Development Projects

I considered PAR an appropriate approach to apply to my project because it encouraged me to (a) self-reflect, (b) build rapport during the early phase of the project, (c) understand and respect the sociocultural backgrounds of the participants, (d) foster engagement, and (e) begin a collective learning process; all of which were integral to a project of this nature. Research has shown that PAR allows researchers to bring substantial change to the lives of community members through a process of transformation which is grounded in critical self-reflection (Freire, 1993). Although PAR is a new approach for researchers to use when working with communities, it has demonstrated sustainable outcomes through collective learning experiences (Maguire, 2006). Therefore, PAR has been noted to foster community empowerment, engagement, and ownership that result in sustainable local development.

Moreover, PAR questions beliefs that only emphasize the use of external skills and expertise while neglecting local knowledge and expertise (Raza, 2018). The potential benefits of applying PAR approaches to development may be a shift from externally focused beliefs and toward trusting local knowledge and

expertise for effectively working with culturally diverse communities (Freire, 1993). Sharing external knowledge with communities while simultaneously trusting locally driven expertise may help introduce the potential of PAR approaches for development projects (Freire, 1993). However, this may be a challenging process, as it may raise questions about the external knowledge, skills, and expertise that development experts hold (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The process of bringing PAR into development projects may also require that development experts show an appreciation for community expertise and be willing to work with communities as learners rather than as experts (Herr, 1999). This transformative process may result in community ownership and empowerment and ensure the sustainability of development projects, which is the goal of development agencies (Raza, 2018).

Outside researchers–practitioners may have a role as assistants in the development process as well; the key is that they do not determine the process, but instead work with the community and honor community voices and expertise (Kamali, 2007). In this way, community members decide how and when they want to be involved, although they might ask outsiders to assist with the decision-making process (Genat, 2009). Researchers, even as outsiders, can play an important role by joining the community and providing them with appropriate assistance and knowledge to carry out the PAR process (Herr, 1999). Once communities learn the PAR process they then ‘own’ the skills to continue to work in this way. This indicates that a PAR process potentially increases the community’s capacity (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

PAR not only considers the current community situation, but also accounts for social, historical, and political contexts to obtain a holistic understanding of diverse communities (Hawkins, 2015). The approach provides community empowerment through training, motivation, and evaluation, all of which improve the overall community environment (Gonzalez et al., 2007). PAR also helps to develop collaboration, coalition, and partnership between researchers and community members; this increases the level of satisfaction among all stakeholders (Thomas, Pate, & Ranson, 2015). This action-oriented approach brings sustainable community change by acknowledging, appreciating, and facilitating community knowledge and expertise (Carr, 2003).

Community level change driven by local knowledge and expertise will be much more sustainable for community members (Herr, 1995). PAR acknowledges that community members are aware of their issues and have the capacity to discover appropriate solutions to these issues by using local knowledge and expertise. They need only external resources—financial, social, and technical—to help them use their skills and expertise to achieve their goals (Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006).

2.2 Reflexivity

Previous research has emphasized the importance of continuous learning and the reflective process in understanding community context and empowering community members (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In my project, reflexivity was the primary key to success, as it facilitated the process of transformation in a work situation with challenges that included (a) diversity among participants, (b) the responsibility of achieving concrete project outcomes, and (c) managing my own identity as a researcher and partial insider.

Herr (2017) showed that self-reflection, collaboration, and openness allows her, as a practitioner researcher, to bring sustainable changes in the existing condition of participants. Similarly, in my project, the reflective process helped me

understand the sociocultural context of the participants and guided me to build a rapport with them in the early phase of the project. Understanding and respecting participants' cultural context was imperative to gain community trust and begin the collective learning process. Herr (1999) elaborated that the reflective process can be challenging for researchers as it questions their own biases and privileges and brings unique tensions to bear on them. However, by having compassion for community members to solve their issues and bring sustainable changes to their lives, researchers may successfully navigate this challenging process, resulting in a win-win situation for researchers as well as community members.

2.3 Collective Learning Process

Researchers who believe in collective learning have successfully applied PAR in their work with community members (Freire, 1993), leading to community collaboration, engagement, and empowerment (Torres, 2004). PAR allows researchers to eliminate the hierarchies between themselves and project participants and engage in a collective learning process as co-learners (Raza, 2018). Hence, PAR decreases disparities and differences by bringing fairness and social justice to the collective learning process (Hawkins, 2015). In my project, switching to PAR from a top-down approach allowed me to respect and appreciate local knowledge and expertise. Instead of directing, I participated in the collective learning process as a co-learner. We learned from each other, which enhanced the learning experiences of all stakeholders and led to local development.

2.4 Local Development

Although PAR presents certain challenges and complexities, it does result in sustainability and local development (Herr, 1995). Researchers and participants construct knowledge together and share skills with each other, which develops the expertise of all partners (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This local development empowers participants and communities because they participate in creating local knowledge that remains with them forever and ensures sustainability (Corsaro, 2005).

In my project, participants learned more than we expected they would. They also realized the potentials of local knowledge and expertise to bring changes to the existing situation in their community. The integration of local and external knowledge and expertise resulted in their empowerment. Consequently, the participants were able to prepare themselves over a short period—two months—to be ready to work as independent organizations, which resulted in local development.

2.5 Project Context

This project took place over a two-month period—from June 18, 2013 to August 18, 2013—and included the training and evaluation of seven community-based organizations (CBOs) in the Muzaffargarh District, one of the oldest districts in the Punjab province of Pakistan. The Muzaffargarh District is situated south of Punjab province and between the Chenab and Indus rivers (Qurratulain & Munazza, 2014). The current population of the Muzaffargarh District is 4.32 million, such that 83.9% of people live in rural areas and 16.1% reside in urban areas (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Females make up 48.7% of the population while males make up 51.3%. The literacy rate of Muzaffargarh for 10 years and older stands at 43% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). There are strong patriarchal norms and customs within the district. Men have more freedom and access to education and employment than women (Oxfam, 2012). Employment consists of agricultural and industrial jobs as well as small business ownership (Raza, 2012).

The two-month project–assignment was part of a larger project entitled “Children’s Action Against Oppression and Neglect” which was implemented by a non-government organization situated in District Muzaffargarh and funded by an international donor agency. For my project, a local organization received funding from the donor agency and implemented various interventions regarding health, education, poverty, and microenterprise in seven union councils. A union council represents a village council in a rural area, which consists of a large village and small villages surrounding the district.

The donor and implementing agencies selected seven union councils after a rapid need assessment and consultation with local stakeholders such as the district government. The implementing agency had carried out this project for the past five years, and community members from these union councils were already engaged in project activities. Initially, in each union council, the implementing agency mobilized community members around the project objectives, interventions, and potential outcomes. After extensive mobilization at the household and community levels, the implementing agency selected adequate people—for example, those who were educated, skilled, and possessed social networking skills—to form one community-based organization in each union council. Each union council’s CBO consisted of seven executive members consisting of both males and females, although males constituted the majority in each. Each union council contained a small CBO office. The members of these CBOs were actively engaged in carrying out project activities with the implementing agency.

The overarching objective of the two-month project was to build organizational development capacity of the seven community-based organizations. Organizational development capacity consisted of learning about writing proposals, stakeholders’ analysis, seeking funding and collaborating with funding agencies, developing survey questionnaires/interview protocols, collecting data, and writing reports.

The project also included pre-test and post-test evaluations. At the beginning of the project I developed a questionnaire in consultation with the implementing agency. This questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were included to assess participants’ prior level of knowledge and understanding about the training subjects (e.g., What is a closed-ended question? What is an open-ended question? What is a need assessment? Who are stakeholders? What is a proposal? What are some of the types of reports?) The open-ended questions were included to learn about participants’ expectations, challenges, and strategies about the training and the project overall (e.g., What are your expectations from this project? What challenges do you expect to face during this project? What strategies would you use to overcome these challenges?). Most of the questions were the same at the pre-test and the post-test levels. However, I included some additional questions at the post-test level with input from the implementing agency. These questions were open-ended and related to respondents’ experiences, shared meanings, and suggestions about the project (e.g., Describe your learning experience of this project? Any suggestions for improvement?).

The agency recruited CBO members of diverse backgrounds based on their educational level, profession, and available time. Employment backgrounds included professions such as (a) agriculture, (b) teaching, (c) small business, (d) industrial work, and (e) domestic work. Most members had up to 10 years of education, some of them had 12 or 14 years of education, and a few had 16 years of education. Members belonged to different ethnicities, but overall, they spoke one common language and shared the same cultural norms and practices. Therefore, they were considered a homogeneous group.

2.6 Project Activities

To achieve its objectives, specific training activities were performed over the course of the two-month project. Initially, these activities were predetermined in that I worked with agency personnel to develop them. However, the process of implementation changed substantially over the course of the project to adapt them according to the backgrounds and contexts of the participants. All stakeholders, including the participants, were actively involved in adapting and implementing these activities. The goal was to achieve project objectives as well as increase the learning experiences of the participants.

3.0 Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Participants learned about quantitative research (i.e., the use and development of different types of closed-ended questions—such as multiple-choice questions and yes–no, questions—and the analysis of quantitative data) and qualitative research (i.e., the use and formation of open-ended qualitative questions, and the analysis of qualitative data) techniques in two separate sessions. In each session, after a large group discussion, participants were divided into small groups. Participants in each group chose an important issue that their community was facing at that time and developed a need assessment questionnaire that contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. After developing the questionnaire, participants practiced collecting data. At the end, we reassembled the large group and discussed each group’s learning experience. The purpose of learning about qualitative and quantitative research was to prepare community members to conduct need assessments in their community in the case of a natural disaster. This would help them coordinate with government and non-government agencies for assistance.

Data collected from need assessment questionnaires would also be helpful when writing proposals requesting funding from donor agencies. This data would provide evidence of the importance, prevalence, and scope of the problem that would be the focus of the project. Qualitative and quantitative research skills could also be used in program evaluation, as funding agencies usually require conducting evaluations over the course of the project life cycle to examine its effectiveness. It was therefore considered very important for the participants to understand research methods and data collection.

3.1 Participatory Rural Appraisal

Another important assessment tool project participants learned was participatory rural appraisal. After a large group discussion session, participants were again divided into small groups. Participants used charts and drew maps of their communities. They highlighted a problem that their community members were experiencing and the potential local resources available at the community level. Each group suggested specific solutions to address the problem based on these resources.

This activity empowered participants in that they made the decisions regarding identifying the problem and suggesting adequate solutions. Participants seemed very engaged in this activity for several reasons. First, the problem they chose was related to their own community. Second, the activity was simple and visual, and it was easy for participants to enjoy the task. Third, and most importantly, when participants reflected on what they learned they described that they had rarely thought about their community issues in such a holistic manner before. Hence, they were very excited after this session.

3.2 Stakeholders' Analysis

Project participants also learned about stakeholders' analysis to identify potential stakeholders for a project, understand their needs, and collaborate with them to ensure the project's success. This activity was quite new and challenging for the participants, but they did a wonderful job. After a large group session, participants were divided into small groups. They identified important primary and secondary stakeholders related to their project. Participants used three-column charts to record the name of each stakeholder and whether they were primary or secondary. Participants also discussed the reasons stakeholders were considered primary or secondary. They shared strategies for reaching out to and collaborating with these stakeholders to maximize their support and fulfill their needs for the success of the project.

3.3 Proposal Writing

Another skill project participants learned was how to write a proposal requesting funding. We discussed every component of a proposal, including (a) background, (b) rationale, (c) objectives, (d) implementation, (e) monitoring, and (f) potential outcomes. After a large group session, participants were divided into small groups. They selected a problem and developed specific objectives of a project focused on addressing that issue in their community. After the small group activity, each group shared their objectives, and other members critically examined whether the objectives were specific and aligned with their project. Participants provided constructive feedback to each other.

After that session, I asked the members of each community-based organization to begin writing a proposal that would be ready to submit to the funding agency they wanted to target by the end of the two months. Due to varying degrees of English proficiency, participants were told not to worry about writing in English so that they could focus on the quality and the depth of their proposals. Completed proposals could be easily translated into English for the purpose of submitting it to the donor agency.

I facilitated the writing of these proposals throughout the rest of the project. Consequently, each organization had one completed proposal by project's end. I also developed a detailed manual explaining how to write a proposal for these community organizations to keep as a resource for future funding.

3.4 Other Activities

Participants engaged in various other learning opportunities during the two months, including (a) report writing—in which we discussed different types of reports, such as daily reports, monthly reports, monitoring reports, and annual progress reports; (b) researching funding opportunities; (c) coordinating with donor agencies; (d) email communication; and (e) developing organizational profiles.

During follow-up visits, we reviewed the CBOs' proposals and discussed strategies for social networking, record keeping, office management, and maintenance. We also exchanged information about potential donor agencies aligned with each CBO's mission and community work to whom they could target their funding requests. Additionally, we explored the reflections of CBO members on the training they received and their plans to apply and expand that knowledge in the future.

3.5 Positionality

In this project, I was neither completely an outsider nor completely an insider. I had worked with another non-government organization situated in the same district for the past few years, so I had experience collaborating with the people of this district. I was living far from the district; however, my native city is in a neighborhood within the district. The culture was quite similar, except for the local language. I could speak both the national language (Urdu) and provincial language (Punjabi). While I could understand the local language (Saraiki), I could not speak it fluently. I communicated in the national and provincial languages, depending upon the situation.

Though I had experience with one similar non-government organization in that district, this was my first time explicitly interacting with community members. Obvious hierarchies existed in local agencies and across CBOs. Being a qualified person—that is, educated, skilled, and experienced—and coming from the capital city usually influenced people socially, and this fact shaped my interactions with the organizations' staff and members. I was also aware of a sense of respect and influence among the community members. However, my young age and physical appearance had some drawbacks—in the local context, age and adult appearance are highly associated with experience, maturity, knowledge, and respect. I expected some challenges during the project, especially when dealing with CBOs, most of whom were made up of individuals much older than I was. These adults hesitated to interact and answer questions in an environment where their facilitator was younger. This situation placed both the older participants and me in a difficult position.

In short, the intersectionality of age, education, and partial outsider status created both pros and cons for me on the project. I found it quite challenging because I had to deal with these social constraints. However, I enjoyed the experience, and I was confident about my success.

4.0 The PAR Process of Transformation

The process of transformation was grounded in critical thinking and reflective process. It brought many changes in the form of community change and empowerment. Despite the challenges of working with community members and facing job constraints including prescribed–pre-determined tasks, I was able to navigate toward PAR because it was the only potential solution based on the uniqueness of the community context and diversity among community members.

4.1 Shifting Towards PAR

The initial pre-training meeting with the CBOs was very challenging. As I expected, they hesitated to interact with me. Some of them discussed my age and dress in their language, assuming I could not understand them. I tried my best to engage them but only partially succeeded. During this initial meeting with community members, I observed and talked to them, trying to make our interactions meaningful. I assumed they were thinking I would fulfill the requirements of the training and leave, that I did not have any interest in improving their situation because I came from a different background and was considered an outsider. Consultants are well-known for focusing on their duties and fulfilling the requirements of the contract they had with such organizations, and the participants were aware of this. All these reasons created a sense of distrust between the CBO members and me.

However, during that pre-training session, I decided to shift from formal conversation to more of an informal discussion by asking questions about their

businesses and their families. Then, I asked about the situation in their district and the current issues they considered important. They provided me with the solutions to their problems themselves. They looked engaged when discussing these matters because they were relating the conversation to their real-life experiences. These experiences were meaningful to them and sharing these experiences with them fostered our relationship.

I did this initially as an experiment and it worked well, so I expanded the conversation further. These interactions with CBO members provided essential insights into the challenges that I would face over the course of the project. They also provided me with an opportunity to rethink and reevaluate my current approach to working with them. Consequently, this pre-training experience proved to be very useful for me. I spent productive time with the CBO members and gained some understanding of their backgrounds and attitudes, as well as the beliefs of the community, all of which helped me shape my approach to carrying out the project dealing with CBO members. This process of gaining community knowledge and understanding community context was not static but was continuous and reciprocal.

4.2 Community Distrust

On the first day of training, almost all members from four CBOs were present. I had not met with most of them previously because only a few representatives from each CBO had attended the pre-training session. I again briefly introduced myself to the participants. Then I gave them a pre-training questionnaire (pre-test) to discover their prior level of knowledge about the training contents, expectations, and challenges. I could see hesitancy and lack of interest expressed non-verbally as they completed the questionnaire and talked with each other. I learned from direct observation that the participants were not engaged and thought of me as an outsider.

After this, I decided to make the training less formal. For example, I used charts and walls to discuss training topics instead of PowerPoint presentations. I tried my best to explain the topics that we discussed during the first day of training, but I witnessed lack of engagement amongst them throughout the day. They informed staff from the implementing agency that I was not providing good training. I was listening to their views but ignoring them and focusing on my work. Through this interaction with the CBO members and by observing their behaviors, I perceived that they were not happy for the reasons I expected—my age, ethnicity, and status as a partial outsider.

They were not ready to accept me as a trainer because they did not trust me at that time, and their culture predisposed them not to give importance to my words, in part because I was younger than they were. Their cultural norms dictated that they should have power and authority over me, but I held the power at that time due to my role as trainer. This power dynamic limited the learning process between us. As a result, both parties experienced loss in terms of knowledge.

It was necessary for me to view the situation through a social justice lens to understand the importance of fairness in our interactions. Shifting my point of view in this manner had positive effects for both the participants—evidenced by their immediate positive reactions (both verbal and non-verbal)—and for me. In this way I was able to stimulate and foster our learning process.

4.3 PAR Critical Thinking

After the first day of training, I rethought my approach, attitude, body language, and behavior with the participants to make our interactions more meaningful. I

questioned why the participants showed a lack of interest and complained about my training skills. I also thought about my distinctive approach with the participants during the pre-training meeting that increased their engagement. After comparing these two interactions with CBO members I found that it was the issue of power that limited the connection, engagement, and learning between us. I also recalled that one panelist raised the concern that I neither looked like them nor spoke their language. Drawing on these various reflections, I reshaped my approach to the project and changed my strategy for the second day of training.

4.4 Gaining Community Trust

On the second day of training, I wore the same style of clothing as the participants, which had an immediate influence on them. I began by explaining my background and that my family resided in one of their neighboring districts, and that I had spent twenty years in that district. I also talked about my friend at another non-government organization in that district. During the day, I reiterated in every way I could ‘I belong to you’ and ‘I am not an outsider’. I behaved in a friendly manner and spoke more informally to remove the power issue and hierarchies between us, which was one of the keys to gaining their trust.

I attempted to speak in their own language (Saraiki). Initially, it was difficult for me but the similarities between my local language (Punjabi) and Saraiki, along with my prior experience working with another non-government agency in the same geographical area, helped me overcome this issue. We were able to communicate well by mixing their local language and mine.

I joined them for lunch that day. They seemed hesitant to talk with me during lunch, but I started conversations about their work, agricultural seasons, children’s education, and my own family, thus minimizing the formalities between us. After this, they began to show interest in the training and asked questions. I was sure at that point that the only way I could engage them and gain their trust was to include myself in the process rather than leading the conversation and influencing their opinions through my knowledge and skills.

I constantly thought about my interactions with them, observed them, and tried to understand context. I found meaning in the experience, which helped me determine my strategy. I also attempted to consider relevant scientific theories and evidence-based programs I thought could help me find a better solution. However, the context was so distinctive and diverse that I felt these evidence-based models were irrelevant in this situation. Nothing helped me except understanding the community members through learning about them. In the end I found that removing power, acquiring community knowledge, and gaining cultural competence made my work quite easy.

4.5 Community Ownership

I continually modified my strategies based on my experience with the CBOs during training, which helped me achieve community trust and active engagement. For instance, I repeatedly told them, “I want to see you working as independent organizations and serving your communities. This is your work and you are responsible for it.” I incorporated most of their feedback into my training contents right away. I also found it very helpful to explain the importance and application of each activity before starting it. For example, before starting the activity of participatory rural appraisal, I described how this tool has been used extensively all over the country, the effectiveness of this tool, and the skills the participants were going to have after learning this tool. I felt that it was essential for the facilitator to discuss the practical application of each

activity specific to participants' experiences and local context, which substantially improved their level of motivation.

I noticed a substantial change in the overall environment. The participants began to show attitudes of learning and make efforts to gain an understanding of the topics discussed during training. I asked everyone to come and write on the charts. I also divided them into groups to perform different activities. I took every opportunity to show appreciation for their efforts, which further motivated them throughout the training. Some groups were working hard to impress me, and I was glad because I could see my respect and importance in their minds and hearts. I could see the happiness on their faces when I expressed my appreciation. It was much easier for me to find meaning in that experience and utilize it as a strategy to gain their trust and engagement.

4.6 Continuous Multi-dimensional Process

During the training, I observed an ongoing change in the behaviors of community members. They began to own the training and tried their best to learn the topics, which were quite difficult for them to understand, especially since some of them had left school several years before. Even female participants who were initially quiet began collaborating with male participants and asking questions about the activities. I made some jokes and, after a while, requested each participant share a funny event in his–her life. That helped create a lighter environment.

I had not considered these strategies prior to this project because I was accustomed to delivering training in a much more formal setting to relatively educated people. For that reason, this was a substantial learning experience for me, and I shaped my behavior and strategies based on the meaning I derived from that experience. In doing this, I unintentionally shifted from using a top-down approach toward a participatory action research approach, which was grounded in community ownership and empowerment. We became partners and co-learners who were co-constructing knowledge in a continuous multi-dimensional learning process.

4.7 Collaborative Process

I expanded the formal training content after interacting with the CBO members. I encouraged them to direct the training and ask questions that increased their interest and engagement. I observed a couple of group members who were less engaged during the training activities. I asked active members to help them understand the topics and encouraged less-engaged participants to speak and to lead a training session regardless of their level of education and understanding.

I could also see positive competition among participants. The training became a much more collaborative and interactive process in which I was there only to facilitate. I made sure that they did not miss any important information and evaluated their level of understanding after each session before moving to the next. The participants did not have any issue with that because we trusted each other as partners and co-learners who believed that this learning process was reciprocal and beneficial for everyone.

4.8 Toward Empowerment

I felt that, because I had gained the participants' trust, they accepted me as their facilitator and understood that their efforts would bring a substantial change in their lives and the lives of their community members. When I completed my last day of training, I again applauded their efforts and asked them to express the differences in their thinking and approaches before and after this training. Did they achieve what they were expecting from the training? What things should I

improve upon for the second phase? It was an open discussion in which everyone expressed his–her views of and suggestions for the training, and the changes that this training brought upon them.

I wrote down their feedback and used it to help me carry out the same training with three other CBOs. When I was leaving the venue, every man hugged me, and the women put their hands on my head. They were as thankful as though I had done something special for them. I saw their respect and the feelings of a strong relationship in their eyes and in their behaviors toward me. I felt successful. During later reflection, I truly felt very happy and satisfied.

5.0 The PAR Lens

The implementing agency decided to conduct the second phase of training in its main office. All seven community-based organizations gathered there for a three-day training session. I was surprised to see their level of understanding when I conducted a review of the contents of the previous training. They remembered most of the topics and concepts and some of them wrote a sample proposal for my review.

When a senior member visiting from the donor agency said that he still had difficulties differentiating between qualitative and quantitative research techniques, one participant immediately offered an accurate explanation, which very much surprised the visitor. I felt very proud of myself at that time and thought as well that I must not underestimate the knowledge and skills of local community members. Each community is diverse, and every member possesses unique qualities. I realized that the key to my success was to understand, appreciate, and celebrate these differences by learning about the perspectives of community members.

I dedicated time after the first day of the second phase of training to review participants' work and provide feedback on their proposals. Those CBO members who could not write their proposals still had many potential ideas generated after learning about proposal writing. The first half of the second day of training was allocated to a session in which one person from the donor agency conducted training about the maintenance of financial records. When I began my training afterward, all CBO members complained about the previous session—that it did not follow adequate approaches and that they could not learn much of it. When I asked for examples, they surprised me by making comparisons to my training approaches, identifying mine as more participatory. I realized a growing awareness of the value of participatory approaches in their minds, which provided me with a sense of success.

During the second phase of training, the implementing agency also provided information to the participants regarding financial aspects of the organization. An individual who had worked with community members conducted a session to educate participants about the maintenance of the cashbook and generation of monthly financial reports. I also attended that session to increase my knowledge. Although the community members already knew him and he had been collaborating with them for a couple of years, I observed distance between them for several reasons.

He used very technical terms that did not make sense to the participants. He struggled to translate the knowledge into simple explanations and examples according to the background and educational levels of the participants, leaving them confused. Both the participants and the facilitator were aware of the difference in power between them. This difference was reinforced as the facilitator sought to maintain it through his actions.

The participants realized that this was a formal session from which they should benefit. They sat quietly and passed the time. The facilitator reiterated several times that it “would not make sense to them,” but that they “have to go through it,” and to “just bear with me, we are almost done.” I questioned the purpose of the session if the participants received no benefit from it. After 30 minutes, the participants began asking the organizer to finish the session as soon as possible. That 30-minute session exhausted them, whereas sitting for several hours attending the training and participating in all the activities before it had not.

Although that session was not fruitful for the participants it provided me with a great lesson—that the goal of a facilitator like myself is not as simple as we usually think when we work with community members. Our words and other ways we communicate, our explanations and examples, and any other approaches to deliver knowledge or skills should be appropriate, aligned, and meaningful based upon the background of the participants. The focus should not be on delivering the information but on creating knowledge and shared meaning associated with that knowledge. Critical thinking and continuous self-evaluation are integral for the facilitator throughout any interaction.

6.0 Cultural Integration

After the completion of the second phase, I conducted follow-up visits with each CBO’s community to evaluate their level of understanding and provide explanations for any concepts that were unclear. The purpose of these follow-up visits was also to help them complete the formal proposal on which they were already working.

During my visits, I always paid respect to the elders—for example, standing when any CBO members arrived in the office who were older than I am, as that was the norm of that culture. I visited their agriculture lands and mango gardens to keep follow-up visits informal and not limited to their offices. That strategy proved to be a good one for discussing their issues at the community level in detail and providing them with feedback on their work and ideas. I also trained them to maintain their offices, search for funding opportunities, interact with donor agencies, and keep important records. My adaptation and assimilation to their cultural practices resulted in these follow-up visits being very useful tools to build their capacity as more productive organizations.

I began referring to older male members of the CBOs as “Bhai Jan,” which means ‘elder brother’. Younger members I called “Beta,” which means ‘son’, and I called female members “sister” and “mother” depending on their age. Using these terms conveyed great respect in that context. I ate with them most of the time, and I never made them think that I was a special person or an outsider within that context. It was so surprising and fascinating to see that they forgot my presence as an outsider and behaved normally with me.

6.1 Supportive Environment

I worked with other, similar organizations in the same capacity; however, I experienced a particularly supportive environment in my interactions with those individuals who held executive positions in this organization. Despite knowing the challenges I was likely to face over the course of this project, they were very friendly, optimistic, and supportive.

Based on my experience, private consultants are highly influenced by the organization or personnel who hire them, but that was not the case in this organization. They showed complete trust in me and provided me with an opportunity to adopt new and unique ways to work with community members. I

never saw them as insecure about how I was interacting with community members or about the information I was collecting from them. They always encouraged me to mix with community members to achieve better results. Those who were helping me operationalize the project activities carefully observed my verbal and nonverbal interactions with those in executive positions. Consequently, I was able to gain adequate support at the lower level of that organization, which was extremely important, as those were the people with whom I interacted regularly and who played an essential role in the success of this project. Having their support was a great resource for me.

I believe that the symbolic meaning created through verbal and nonverbal interactions between me and the agency staff had an important positive impact on the participants in terms of recognizing the importance of learning the training contents and its application for them in the future. For instance, we had staff members from the implementing agency as well as the funding agency visit from time to time during the training. In one of the stakeholders' analysis sessions, I was so happy to hear a visitor tell the participants that stakeholders' analysis was an important part of professional development training he received abroad, and that they were receiving valuable knowledge in our training session. I think those comments had a substantial positive effect on the participants, which in their minds increased the effectiveness of this session as well as the entire project. The overall environment was supportive, and everyone was trying their best to support the members of CBOs so that they could work independently and bring changes in the lives of their community members. I believe that my project was a challenging task for all stakeholders. However, the target was well achieved through a strong collaboration among all of them.

I learned from this experience that organizations should be open to accept change and modify their traditional and predesigned strategies or approaches to work with community members. It is important for a researcher–facilitator to experience trust and support from the organization with which they work. The acceptance of new ideas, approaches, and learning attitudes—while ensuring that the researcher has all the appropriate support available to carry out the project successfully—is the key to success, not only for the researcher, but also for the organization.

6.2 Learning Attitude

I feel that my optimism about the project encouraged me to accept challenges positively. I really wanted to have the unique experience of working with local communities, and this project provided me with that opportunity. I was passionate about my work because I found it interesting to develop and enhance the capacity of these local organizations so that they would be able to work independently. Additionally, I had a humble attitude towards learning that made me successful in achieving the respect among CBOs, a task that was quite difficult due to my background—young and educated, with partial outsider status. Finally, I believed in myself that I could do this, even when it seemed very complicated.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper has presented a real-world application of participatory action research while working with culturally diverse communities. In it I showed that the process of transformation from a top-down approach to a PAR approach resulted in community engagement, collective learning, and local development. This process of transformation was grounded in continuous self-reflection that increased my ability, as a practitioner researcher, to appreciate local knowledge and expertise. Consequently, I was able to work with the participants in a

collective learning process to co-construct knowledge through positive reciprocal interactions. Although the process of transformation was challenging and complex, it paid off by empowering the participants and ensuring the sustainability of project outcomes.

7.1 Limitations

The study possessed certain limitations, which bear mentioning. First, CBO members were not engaged in the selection process of the researcher nor in developing the roles and responsibilities of the researcher for this project. This was a part of the decision-making process in which community partners should have been engaged.

Second, although the methods of delivery were changed and participants' feedback was incorporated into the training contents during the project, it was still a directed process through which the researcher had to complete the contents designed for the training in a limited time period.

Third, the researcher was not completely working in the community, as he was located at the agency's office. He was interacting with community members during the training, in meetings, and for follow-up visits. Community members were also meeting with the researcher at the organizational office from time to time, but he was living apart from them.

Finally, participants were given the questionnaire, which was already designed by the researcher and the agency's staff, at the pre-test and post-test levels of the project. This might have limited the validity of the questions and made them less meaningful for the participants. However, the qualitative and open-ended questions were also included at the pre-test and the post-test levels, which provided the respondents an opportunity to express their experiences in their own words.

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