

PARTICIPATORY NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Codrina ŞANDRU¹

Abstract: *Participatory needs assessment (PNA) is a research method, based on the principle of participative democracy. PNA offers the right to speak to the people living within local communities and, furthermore, it attempts to place the problems and the solutions submitted by citizens on the decision-makers' working agendas. Being often a first stage in the process of research-action, PNA is the most certain modality to find the community members' perception on their collective needs, as well as their attitudes towards these needs. In this study, I describe the basic methodological elements of PNA and I show both the advantages and the limits of this method, with three cases from today's literature.*

Key words: *participatory needs assessment, community, research-action, rapid participatory appraisal, participatory communal appraisal.*

1. Introduction

Participatory needs assessment (PNA) is a research method whereby the community members are asked how they see the most important needs or problems of their community; and the research results guide the future actions to be undertaken in the community. Basically, the needs considered to be of maximal importance will be transposed in priority action goals.

PNA is a research method based on the principle of participative democracy, which upholds the citizens' active participation in democratic life, encourages the dialogue between citizens and public authorities and advances innovating share-capital consolidation forms, within local communities; the strength of the share capital and its importance for social

development having been recognized for a long time within sociologic theories [2].

Local communities have not always been consulted in social-change processes. As part of a former communist system, Romania and the other South-Eastern and central European countries, experienced, for half a century, the policy of social-economic development induced by a discretionary power, which set the developmental objectives based on its own political desiderata. Communities would not be consulted. The role of local authorities and citizens was limited to forced approval of the Party and State politics.

In the framework of the new paradigm of social development [13], PNA gives the right to speak, to the people living in local communities and, moreover, it attempts to place the problems and solutions submitted

¹ Faculty of Sociology and Communication, *Transilvania* University of Brasov.

by citizens on the working agendas of the public authorities, which act as decision-makers.

2. Advantages and difficulties in using PNA

PNA is a first stage in the so-called research-action process, deemed to be essential for community development [4]. Research-action, often called participative research [8] is regarded as “a collaborative venture, the outcome of which is the application of research findings into the process of community development” and their applications “include needs assessment, evaluation and sustaining projects” [11, p.52].

This research approach involves the subjects – or a part of them – in achieving the so-called research, in elaborating the action strategies and in implementing the proposed changes, on a community level. Hence, if, by PNA we set the goal to identify the problems and possible solutions, as they are envisaged by the local people and to inform the community on the research results, searching at the same time for local human and material resources destined for change, the research-action supposes even more: the citizens’ involvement in as many stages of the research and intervention process, especially in the phases focused on inducing concrete changes, on a community level.

According to Ledwith [4], participative research in the community is an *emancipating approach*, as the subjects are involved in the research as co-participants in an action targeted on social change. It supposes reflection and self-reflection, stimulating the community members to become more aware of their collective problems. The research is guided by questions such as: Which are the problems/needs? In whose light, do they constitute

problems or needs: for the overall community, for some categories, for the authorities etc.? Who are those responsible? What do we know about these problems or needs, which is the expertise in solving them? How can the community members get involved and contribute thereto? How can they offer support and assistance in implementing change?

PNA is truly the most certain way to find the perception of the community members on their collective needs and their attitudes towards these needs. The demographic variables may be very useful in ascertaining the various perceptions on the needs, as it is possible for women to have different answers from men, or the youth from elderly etc. Therefore, the correlation between these variables and the perception on the community needs is desirable in achieving the design of the field research. It is important for us to know whether women and men see differently the community problems and their solution, or whether age, income, ethnicity and the other socio-demographic variables are correlated with the perception on needs/problems/ local resources or with the intention to participate in solving the community problems.

The participative assessment of a community’s needs is, at the same time, a research *approach* and a community-development *method*. By involving people in expressing their own viewpoints and in offering solutions, one would expect the motivation for one’s participating in the public zone to rise and the community *empowerment* to be strengthened [4]. Empowerment is defined as “process by which socially excluded or marginalized groups are given a greater voice in matters that affect their lives” [11, p.55].

However, PNA may face a major difficulty [11]: the community people may be sceptical or even refractory towards the actual research process and towards the

change it may entail, which will diminish the participation rate. It is highly challenging for the researcher to raise the local community members' level of interest and not to cause "disempowering", in case nothing good happens following the participative research.

Another risk is that repeated researches might make people feel exploited, as "cheap form of research labour" [11, p.56], and the communities become tired and apathetic.

Despite these possible difficulties, the great advantage of PNA remains that the community people are partners in planning the change.

The key to success for the participative needs assessment lies in negotiating a reasonable agenda for change, with the local authorities, by setting realistic goals and by choosing adequate time intervals for their fulfilment [11].

Hence, PNA helps the community to prioritize and plan its interventions; the return of the research results being of vital importance.

According to Bergier (2000 apud [7], p.10) the return is the act whereby "the researcher shares to his/her interlocutors, located on the field, for ethical and/or heuristic purposes, the provisional and/or definitive results of the processed data, which have been collected to this effect". Bergier reckons it is a compulsory stage of the research approach, wherein the information are returned to various representative groups of the population located on the field, not only to the authorities.

3. Recommendations to make the research design

The questions asked during the field survey may have the following form: What do you perceive as a problem to be solved in your community? How does it affect

your own life? Why do such problems exist? What do we know about them? What can we do to solve them? Which are needed resources to this effect? [5].

Within a research conducted this year, in the village of Racoş, county of Braşov, Romania, we have chosen to formulate¹ only open questions, in order to find out the problems faced by the local community. The beneficiary of this research, to wit the Association for Community Partnership Braşov, asked us to conduct an exhaustive research, in all village households, with a view to finding the citizens' perception on the problems faced by the local community; the purpose of the beneficiary being to supply the local public administration with an efficient community-development strategy.

We have built a working tool, namely a structured interview with six open questions and seven questions on the respondents' socio-demographic features. The questions on the community targeted obtaining the indwellers' perceptions and opinions on the main common issues, on the reasons for their emergence, on the local resources and solutions. Likewise, the survey has two separate columns, one for the relevant observations of the volunteers that collect field data and the other for mentioning the persons that declare their availability to participate in the future community activities.

The moment this article is being written, I have already collected 92 field surveys; and the next stage supposes their processing as qualitative data, with a view to formulating a Grounded Theory [3], [12] necessary for elaborating the local-development plan. We encountered no problem in applying this instrument on the field. After the processing of all data, the research results shall be rendered within reunions with the formal and informal local leaders, as well as with other community persons who declared, in the

survey, their intention to participate in collective actions of local development.

The research conducted by the PNA method should have a flexible design, by merging the quantitative and qualitative methods: questionnaire-based inquiries, interviews, focus-groups, map elaboration, drama groups etc [5]. Furthermore, the design should also reach an ethical dimension, starting from the premise of the partnership with the research subjects and promoting the idea of their equal voices (Phenice, 2009 apud [8]).

4. Examples of PNA-based researches

4.1. Needs assessment in *Be Well* project

Titterton and Smart [11] conducted a research in a deprived community in a Scottish city, with a view to identifying the local community members' health needs, and transposing them in a coherent strategy targeting the development of the healthcare services, on a local level. The study was financed by the organization *Be Well*, a supplier of healthcare services such as: counselling, complementary therapies, short courses, workshops and health promotional events.

The research has been participatory from the start, as a working group was formed, consisting of local community members who used the health services of the organization *Be Well*. In this group, the data-collection instrument was realized as an interview guide. Then, other local community members were employed to collect field data, the idea being that their involvement as interviewers has two advantages: first, as dwellers, knowing community persons and realities, they will have a greater chance to motivate their fellow citizens to participate in the research; secondly, they will have themselves the opportunity to develop new skills. The interviewers were consulted

with a view to completing the questions in the interview guide, they were instructed before making the field interviews and they were paid for their services.

Within the research, one hundred face-to-face interviews were made, whereof fifty with the users of the healthcare services provided by *Be Well* and the other fifty with a sampling of users, randomly chosen from the local population.

The research results showed that the project of the aforementioned organization has a series of benefits for the local community. The healthcare users and the volunteers in health promotion manage to better deal with daily stress, have higher self esteem and develop a stronger feeling of membership in the local community and neighbourhood.

As regards the methodology, the authors of the study regard the involvement of the local community members in the research as beneficial, both for themselves and for the quality of the research. The process of *empowering* occurs because the participants acquire new skills: communication, group discussions, interviewing, reflection, trust strengthening etc. The research also stimulated the interest of the local authority and overall community in promoting health. "Community members enjoyed participating and taking advantage of an opportunity to influence the provision of health promoting services appropriate to their needs. Benefits of participating included gaining greater knowledge about health issues and the role of research and its potential to influence decisions" [11, p.59].

In my viewpoint, a weakness of this study is that the aforementioned benefits were not explicitly described, but were identified by informal feedback. In my opinion, it is worth conducting studies focused on this methodological dimension of the research, which is supposed,

guessed, rather than measured with adequate sociological tools.

Anyway, the authors emphasize that, throughout the work with vulnerable groups, the involvement of the local community members in the research is useful, as a feeling of trust emerges between interviewer and interviewee, which raises the chance of obtaining correct and plentiful information, as against the situation when the interviewer is an outsider. In my opinion, the interviewers recruited from the community must be well chosen, unsuspecting, as, otherwise, the feeling of trust is lost and the subjects are uncooperative. I dare say, these persons should by no means be part of a public management structure, or be known as active members in a political party or militants for a cause likely to generate tensions in the relation with the various target-groups of the research.

The authors recommend, in the framework of the participative research, to also use other techniques than the classical ones – survey and interview. They propose, for instance, the Facilitated Discussion Groups wherein the participants' concrete experiences are highlighted and the exchanges of opinions and conceptions between participants and facilitator are encouraged, developing thereby a "collective wisdom". This technique enables identifying priorities, exploring solutions and setting a working agenda, in order to attain one's goals.

4.2. Rapid Participatory Appraisal in Bali

With a view to assessing the social and health needs experienced by the dwellers of a rural locality in Bali, Tulikup, and to developing a public-communication strategy, for health and social development purposes, the organization Health Communication Resources [9] resorted to the so-called RPA – rapid participatory

appraisal – defined as "a qualitative research method used to collect information needed to formulate an action plan within a short time period without a large expenditure of professional time and finances" (Murray and Graham, 1995 apud [11]).

The research was financed by a local media network, Heartline Bali FM (HBFM) and involved two stages. The first stage lasted two weeks and consisted in establishing the communication with the stakeholders, in collecting and processing the information related to the community needs. The second stage, covering the third week, involved carrying further the discussions with the community members, in order to verify the information collected beforehand, to share the opinions related to priorities and to establish community-development strategies.

The researchers resorted to semi-structured interviews with key informers, to individual and group informal discussions, to observation and analysis of secondary data. Of the 57 interviews, 17 were targeted on persons in the community's managerial structures (both in the official and traditional structure) and in the health, educational and religious structures. Informal discussions with teenagers were organized, so as to obtain their viewpoint on the community needs. Other group interviews were made with the staff of the regional State-owned hospital, of the local primary school and of the financing organization. Poor families and families with special needs stood for a relevant category. Therefore, nine separate discussions were organized within their life environment, which provided interesting data through the observation method.

The secondary analysis dwelled upon census data and upon data supplied by the public health services. The observation method was used in order to collect information about the community's physical and relational characteristics,

about the nature of the interactions between youth and elderly people etc.

At the end of each day, the collected data were analyzed and introduced in a ten-category scheme, settled a-priori, as a pyramid of the health-related information on a community level (Annett and Rifkin, 1995 apud [9]). The secondary data, as well as the data obtained by observation, were used in order to compare the results, observing the principle of the data triangulation. The information obtained through the interviews were made known to the participants, with a view to obtaining the validation of the experience they shared throughout the research – an approach called by the authors “auto-reflection process”.

The research results were divided into four main themes: 1) needs to improve the economic situation 2) needs for health services and health-promotion services 3) problem of the children aged under 17 years old, yet involved in the labour process 4) perception of the insufficient community benefits from the organization financing the research, HBFM. As regards the developmental strategies, the RPA method led to new ideas and partnerships for the local development: a project of cultural tourism, an educational project focused on nutrition, participative radio broadcasts involving the local community members, a day dedicated to children etc.

The authors' conclusion is that the RPA-type research is a first efficient step towards involving the community in assessing their own needs and in developing the local services.

4.3. Participative research in conflicting communities – Participatory Communal Appraisal method

In the case of the communities characterized by tensions or violence among the various social groups, an

interesting methodological stance is advanced by J. G. Bock [1]. This author notices a certain superficiality of the RPA method described before. Despite its wide use by international organizations, such as the Red Cross, the weakness of this method resides in its emphasizing *screening* rather than *listening*; not reaching therefore to the desired outcomes. A better approach should consider “a disciplined listening and learning process” [1, p.148], which supposes the use of a participatory approach, with a view to assessing the needs and identifying the conflict-mitigation solutions.

By “communal conflict”, the author refers to the conflicts among groups with various identities: ethnical, racial, cultural, gender, religious, caste or socio-economic status. After the Second World War, organizations such as the Red Cross or various NGOs intervened in conflict areas, offering support to the vulnerable groups: was victims, refugees etc. Meanwhile, a new approach emerged; it was focused on the idea of social development: to support the groups in risky situations not only with external help, but also by helping them to become agents involved in solving their own problems and in improving their social situation. In this way, the international organizations launched programs targeted on “helping build inter-communal bridges while doing their more *traditional* relief and development work” [1, p.147].

The RPA methodology is useful, due to its involving the community members in the strategies for change; yet it must be completed with a new dimension, focused on the existing conflict. Bearing the name of Participatory Communal Appraisal (PCA), Bock advances a series of elements, meant to improve the RPA method – derived from the experience of successful international projects:

- To obtain the viewpoints of all groups involved in the conflict.

- To achieve a *map of the community*, wherein the geographical placement of the groups with various identities should be highlighted, and the *livelihood analysis* technique should be used (Theis and Grady, 1991 apud [1]) in order “to identify the behaviour and coping strategies of people of different groups in terms of how they make a living” [1, p.149]. The two techniques are important for understanding the economic dependences and the relations between groups, which are not salient to an external observer.
 - To achieve a *flow diagram* displaying the evolution of the conflict in the community, in order to understand the mechanisms underlying the change of tension into violence; and especially in order to find out how non-violent persons get involved in the conflict. Here, one must consider the holidays and significant events for the groups, precisely for seeing the connection between these identity-related events and the moments of tension or violence.
 - The creation of balanced research-teams, which, beside professional researchers, should also include community members capable of an open and even attitude towards those defined as *others* – the so-called “multi-communal teams”.
 - To identify the perception of the way in which innovating ideas and project proposals for community change may influence the tensions and conflict, which may be done by questions such as: Who can benefit, materially and symbolically, from this project? Could this project nurture a sense of the membership in the community for the groups with different identities? Is this project useful for increasing the receptiveness of the community leaders towards the mitigation of the conflict?
 - To achieve a matrix of the potential undesired consequences, by assessing the impact of the various purposes and activities on the groups.
- Using an already known metaphor in the ideology of the *empowerment* concept, Bock claims that the use of the PCA method by the support international agencies is useful for the community, not by virtue of their offering “fish”, but by virtue of learning people how to “catch fish” in a new way; the chance thereby increasing for them to organically, not forcefully, go beyond the difficult conflicting situations.

5. Conclusions

By this paper, I attempted to explain what the *Participatory Needs Assessment* means and how it is done, synthesizing studies on this approach both in methodological terms and in the light of concrete situations. I noticed that, despite difficulties and limitations specific to sociological studies (possible apathy of the community and the risk to make the community members feel exploited for being asked information and personal opinions), PNA is very useful to any local-development program. It provides the socio-economic decision-making bodies with some kind of mirror clearly reflecting the community face, as well as the perception of the community members on the problems they face and the solution they envisage. The method is, at the same time, an exercise for raising the community participatory level, starting from the premise that the interest in how people see and interpret their life environment determines their higher opening towards collective actions. And the involvement in collective actions means, in its turn, more useful, more respectful citizens, trusting each other [10], capable of falling under the logic of association and efficient social organization [6].

Notes

- ⁱ There is about a community study achieved through the PNA method, together with my colleague, Florentina Scârnci, Ph.D.

References

1. Bock, J.G.: *Towards participatory communal appraisal*. In: *Community Development Journal* 36 (2001) No. 2, p. 146-153.
2. Field, J.: *Social Capital* (second edition). London and New York. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2008.
3. Flick, U.: *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (fourth edition). Sage Publications Ltd, 2009.
4. Ledwith, M.: *Community development. A critical approach*. The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011.
5. McIntyre, A.: *Participatory Action Research*. In: *Qualitative Research Methods* 52 (2008), Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore. Sage Publications.
6. Olson, M.: *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, 1965 [2002].
7. Pascaru, M., Buşiu, C.A.: *Restituirea rezultatelor și dezvoltarea comunitară (Refund results and community development)*. Cluj-Napoca. Argonaut Publishing House, 2007.
8. Pascaru, M.: *Cercetarea participativă și științele sociale aplicate (Participatory research and applied social sciences)*. Cluj-Napoca. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2011.
9. Peppal, E., Earnest, J., James, R.: *Understanding community perception of health and social needs in a rural Balinese village: results of a rapid participatory appraisal*. In: *Health Promotion International* 22 (2006) No. 1, p. 44-52.
10. Putnam, R.D.: *Cum funcționează democrația? Tradițiile civice ale Italiei moderne (How does democracy work? Civic Traditions in Modern Italy)*. Iași. Polirom Publishing House, 1993 [2001].
11. Titterton, M., Smart, H.: *Can participatory research be a route to empowerment? A case study of a disadvantaged Scottish community*. In: *Community Development Journal* 43 (2008), No. 1, p. 52-64.
12. Scârnci, F.: *Îndrumar de cercetare calitativă în științele socio-umane (Handbook of qualitative research in social and human sciences)*. Braşov. Transilvania University of Brasov Publishing House, 2007.
13. Zamfir, C.: *Dezvoltarea socială: câteva elemente teoretice (Social development: some theoretical aspects)*. In: *O nouă provocare: dezvoltarea socială (A new challenge: social development)*, Zamfir, C., Stoica, L. (eds.). Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2006, p. 11-29.