

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Jordi de Cambra, Xavier Rambla, Xavier Besalú, Gonzalo Escobar, Salomó Marquès i
Montserrat Mora Fernández
Internacional UNESCO Chair

‘Human sustainable development: equity, participation and intercultural education’
(U. de Girona –Spain-, U. de La Habana –Cuba- and U. Bolivariana –Chile-)
and

UNESCO/UNITWIN Medeuramerica Network for Human Development

Note: We are presenting this first draft to be discussed at the Ies Jornades Internacionals sobre Moviments Socials i Recerca Activista, to be hold at the Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris de Barcelona from 22 to 25 January 2004. We thank in advance both the comments and critiques from participants at the Meeting as well as from members of the UNESCO Chair and the Medeuramerica Network for Human Development.

RESUM.- En aquesta comunicació hem explorat les connexions entre tres conceptes que orienten la nostra tasca: El desenvolupament humà sostenible és l'ampliació durable de les oportunitats vitals, econòmiques i culturals. El coneixement transdisciplinari travessa tant les fronteres de les especialitats com de l'especialització per afrontar problemes complexos. La recerca participant elabora diagnòstics col·lectius d'una situació a fi d'intervenir-hi. Hem apuntat algunes raons per justificar que el coneixement transdisciplinari és intrínsec a la mateixa empresa d'aconseguir el desenvolupament humà, i que la recerca participant és una eina per crear aquest coneixement tan integrat i també per afavorir el desenvolupament humà.

RESUMEN.- En esta comunicación hemos explorado las conexiones entre tres conceptos que orientan nuestro trabajo. El desarrollo humano sostenible es la ampliación duradera de las oportunidades vitales, económicas y culturales. El conocimiento transdisciplinario atraviesa tanto las fronteras de las especialidades como la misma frontera de la especialización para afrontar problemas complejos. La investigación acción participante elabora diagnósticos colectivos de una situación con el fin de intervenir en ella. Hemos apuntado algunas razones para justificar que el conocimiento transdisciplinario es intrínseco a la misma empresa de conseguir el desarrollo humano, y que la investigación participante es un instrumento para crear este conocimiento integrado y también para favorecer el desarrollo humano.

ABSTRACT.- In this paper we have explored the connections between the three concepts that guide our work. Human sustainable development is the durable broadening of vial, economic and cultural opportunities. Transdisciplinary knowledge crosses the boundaries of both specialty and specialisation in order to tackle with complex problems. Participatory research makes collective diagnoses of a situation in order to intervene on it. We have pointed out several reasons to justify that transdisciplinary knowledge is intrinsic to the very endeavour to attain human development. Similarly, participatory research helps us to create such integrated knowledge as well as to foster human development.

In this paper we want to present the ideas that guide our research, the way we articulate them and some examples of their concrete applications. Our UNESCO Chair gathers people, coming from both the academy and several associations, who want to broaden the scope of transdisciplinary knowledge in order to contribute to human sustainable development. In our view, participatory action research is a very operational and promising tool to attain these goals. In the following pages we will discuss these concepts as well as the opportunities they open and the threats that some of its senses entail.

The UNESCO International Chair on Human Sustainable Development was born in 1998 so as to establish new links between academic knowledge and projects of social intervention and international co-operation. Nowadays, its siege is located in three universities and two associations. From 2003 on its Catalan siege is the University of Girona, altogether with the two mentioned associations, namely the Group for Action Research with Cultural Minorities and Foreign Workers (in Catalan, GRAMC) and SOS Racism- Catalonia. Besides university teaching, it is also involved in plans for sustainable tourism at the Costa Brava and the activities scheduled by the two associations. The siege at the University of La Habana has been a part of the Chair since its very beginning. Several of its current projects include community development and its participation into the Cuban Program for Human Development at the Local level, implemented by the United Nations Program for Human Development (UNDP). The Universidad Bolivariana is mostly located in Santiago de Chile and has become the third siege in 2003. It offers a subject on human development in all its pre-degree programs, and organises its practical courses so that they contribute to the local development of the Yungay Area, where most of its faculties are located. Other members of the Medeuramerica Network are the UNIDA Foundation in Buenos Aires (which provides training and collaboration to social movements), the UNESCO International Chair on Durable Development at the Rio de Janeiro Federal University (which has worked on the empowerment of local female associative leaders), the Research Group on World Economy at the University of Barcelona (on of whose projects has been the calculation of the regional HD indexes in Spain) and the Department of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (in this Department, the Seminar for the Analysis of Social Policy is at the moment researching the connection between educational and anti-poverty policies in Argentina, Brazil and Chile).

Human sustainable development

According to the UNDP, development is human if it enhances people's opportunities to pursue what they want to be a good life. Such aim requires that the process fosters empowerment, equity between men and women and socially responsible governance. But it has also attempted to define a measure of human development that takes account of ways of living, education (enrolment and literacy) and longevity in a given country. Furthermore, its approach assumes that human development has to comply with the criterion that the UNESCO World Commission on Development and Environment established in the late eighties to define sustainability: it has to fulfil the needs of present generations without damaging the possibility of future generations to fulfil their own needs.

There are clear and explicit relationships between this notion of development and many other academic and political traditions of thought. It draws on the thirty-years-old concept of development at a human level (i.e., measured according to the degree of satisfaction of human needs). Amartya Sen's work is another source of inspiration, and thus the philosophical debate on social justice. Besides, the project to build a sustainable world is extended beyond environmental issues. Human development also emphasizes the importance of social and school-based universal and democratic education that bridges the gaps between cultures and between generations. As a consequence of all these premises, it brings anti-discrimination struggles into the first places in the agenda.

A common misunderstanding should be prevented by highlighting the rich implications of this definition and its sources. Certainly, the statistical measure of human development has been very useful, as work in progress on local HD is. However, neither the UNDP nor Sen have never pretended that the concept is to be restricted to the contention on statistical indicators. Similarly, the official endeavour to guide public policy in base to local salient measures of human development has portrayed wholesome accounts of the state of health, education, economy and urban conditions of the poorest people from many countries. Such results have become powerful instruments to evaluate action and have introduced anti-poverty concerns in the political agenda of many governments. However, not all the approaches share the same value nor the same principles. We feel that it is necessary to insist on the extension of human development beyond poverty alleviation, and what is more, to challenge the common identification of both issues.

Transdisciplinary knowledge

Knowledge should become more and more transdisciplinary if human sustainable development is to be really large and sound. Knowledge is our capability to construct worldviews as well as to understand our own and other people's motivation; in fact, it enables us to keep meaningful bonds with others and to realise and respect our own position in nature. Thus, culture and power shape knowledge in many different fashions. In our view, transdisciplinary knowledge goes through the boundaries of academic disciplines so as to establish new relations between them and to strengthen a more effective dialogue between specialists and lay people. It does not only have to do with the multi-disciplinary combination of several perspectives nor with inter-disciplinary borrowing with respect to an specific question, but it also aims to elaborate new and qualitatively distinct syntheses.

Transdisciplinary knowledge is pragmatic and co-operative. We are neither dealing with a new unique science hanging from nowhere nor we are only arguing for an epistemological thesis. On the contrary, we found these features out inasmuch as it proves to be the best way to face and solve complex problems. Complex problems emerge from many heterogeneous elements why make reference to quite different kinds of expertise at the same time as well as to the common knowledge of many other people affected by the problem. Building transdisciplinary knowledge entails two conditions. Firstly, co-operative links are established between all these agents; and secondly, nobody draws on coercion to deny the validity of any kind of knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, this operational value is mostly realised when the complexity of such problems as human poverty emerge. But we also have to remind that transdisciplinary

knowledge challenges several rules of academic institutions. For this reason, it often experiences deep strains with some discourses about the information society or some others attacking academic work in base to epistemological relativism. Even though we don't want to discuss these questions here, a short comment is necessary. In our view, co-operative dialogue entails respect for the validity of both specialties and lay perspectives, that is to say, it is not licit to impose the validity of one form of knowledge at all, nor to deny the validity of all of them on the grounds that a priori all images of reality deserve the same validity.

The local endeavours to foster human development provide a very good example of its connection with transdisciplinary knowledge. Although decent life and work, education, health, participation, gender equity, sustainability or cultural democracy do not only depend on local phenomena, certainly all of them become much more meaningful at this level. Besides, it is noticeable that a variety of economic, cultural, social and environmental factors play a role to attain the objective. In summary, that pragmatism easily wakes up at this scale of human agency.

Participatory action research

Participatory action research is one of the most effective, operational and democratic ways to trigger processes in favour of human development. This method is inspired on many academic and popular sources of knowledge about political life. Overall, its pioneers have been the supporters of community development in Latin America, who aim to constitute the community by means of the collective definition of problems and the discussion of solutions.

This problem- solution schema has shown to be a very useful instrument in order to spell out the hidden potential of many circumstances. Actually, the scholar and theologian Paolo Freire discovered years ago that the best way to teach the illiterate to read and write consists of asking them to start with the words closely related to their needs and their own knowledge to fulfil them. Like Freire's pedagogic method, participatory action research expects to foster a complex collective knowledge, that deploys heterogeneous elements and capabilities about the group needs. That is to say, it opens a two way communication between the so-called subject and object of study.

Once again we want to remind that this is a large issue that this pages cannot present completely. In spite of the risk to be very schematic, we will restrict our argumentation at this point to explain how several initiatives of Medeuramerica Network members have used participatory research to elaborate a transdisciplinary knowledge that may contribute to human development.

- Human Development at the local Level Programs (HDLPs) start with a participatory definition of priorities and devote a large space to this activity in their planning. Besides, they disseminate these priorities along a de-centralised network of actors involved in international co-operation including local governments and associations. The UNDP has assumed the compromise to double the amount of money they can obtain in this way. The HDLP- Cuba actually aims to rebuild the centre of La Havana, to diversify the economy of the tobacco company of Pinar del Río and to promote several of the Eastern poorest localities in the island.

- The Universidad Bolivariana defines itself as a communitarian university for several reasons. It tries to foster dialogue between people with different worldviews, to avail non-elite students to go to university, and contribute to fulfil the needs of the Yungay area at the Santiago municipality, where it is located. It has organised its practical courses to implement this intention: they are based on a previous analysis of the area needs and ulterior projects try to respond to them from all the academic specialties. Some of them are the popular radio, theatre on everyday life, free legal advice, the psychological clinic or ethnographic work.
- Economic, environmental, cultural and social contradictions have compelled several municipalities in the Catalan coast to look for new ways to favour sustainable tourism. The Chair has been involved in the collective discussions whereby citizens from several localities have pointed out the problems arising from seasonal variations of employment, urban massification, and scarcely transparent planning. They have also essayed how to start the way of a participatory discussion of solutions.

Neither HDLPs nor communitarian universities or local development can be implemented without gathering several specialties of techno- scientific, socio- scientific or humanistic knowledge. And all three initiatives try to establish new bridges between specialists and lay people. Participatory research plays a crucial role so as to make these conditions real, since it provides the tools for a collective learning of diagnosis and proposal. In a way, in these processes the specialists become the technical staff of the involved common people, who define problems and looks for solutions.

This kind of initiatives promise to broaden human opportunities and empower local communities. They contribute to human development in this way. However, the rigorous economic, political and statistical elaboration of this concept also allows us to establish another relationship between both participatory action and human development. The following question expresses it: how can we know that participatory research actually fosters human development?

The question requires a theory of evaluation that establishes, justifies and details the criteria to determine the effects of participatory research on human development. Although we lack the answer at the moment, we can advance two observations. Firstly, such initiatives can only impinge on HD indicators in the long term, even though we can create some local HD indicators which are more sensitive to short term possible effects. Secondly, participatory research fosters human development inasmuch as it consolidates some rules of collective election (of future projects) that comply with certain other criteria. The following makeshift list can be a starting point: these criteria should require the reasoned discussion of all views, the active listening of all participants, and an egalitarian participation in decision making of men and women of all ages coming from all social classes and ethnic groups, as well as they should take account of both the private and the public responsibilities of people.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the connections between the three concepts that guide our work.

- Human sustainable development is the durable broadening of social, economic and cultural opportunities.
- Transdisciplinary knowledge crosses the boundaries of both specialty and specialisation in order to tackle with complex problems.
- Participatory research makes collective diagnoses of a situation in order to intervene on it.

We have pointed out several reasons to justify that transdisciplinary knowledge is intrinsic to the very endeavour to attain human development. Similarly, participatory research helps us to create such integrated knowledge as well as to foster human development.