

Chapter 1

Re-Thinking Methodology through the E-Bario Project: From Participatory Methods to a Relational Approach to ICT for Rural Development in Sarawak, East Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the value and limitations of participative development employed in the implementation of an ICT-based research and development project in the Kelabit Highlands of Central Borneo. The first section describes the reasons for e-Bario project and why participative development, with a strong emphasis on the anthropological methods of immersion and Participatory Action Research (PAR), has been adopted as development approach in Bario. In the second section I interrogate participatory development as practiced in the e-Bario by bringing to light a number of problematic aspects of the participative technique, in which conflicts have arisen over the development process, and the interpretation of participation itself has been vigorously questioned. Later, I propose a relational view of the participative process, which suggests a shift of focus from technology to people and social relations. My argument is that a relational perspective of participative process can open up a social space for local people and developers to identify, cultivate and establish social relationships both within and beyond a project's framework. It is these bonds of trust and obligation, developed and sustained over the longer term, that have allowed the Kelabit and the researchers to work out their social relationships to one another in matters concerning e-Bario.

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INTRODUCTION: EMERGENCE AND PROBLEMS OF PARTICIPATIVE DEVELOPMENT

In late 1980s “development” has been criticised and labelled by some as a failed industry especially within the post-structuralist literature as such should be made obsolete (see for instance, Esteva, 1987; Shet, 1987; Fals Borda, 1988). On the contrary, some scholars and practitioners (for example Chambers 1993) who are engaged in a search for better strategies for interventions suggested that taking local culture, context, conditions and participation by local people into account in development process and practices can be one of the solutions to many failures of development projects. This approach is considered important to curtail the negative effects of development interventions and, most importantly to ensure that the economic, social and cultural benefits of technologies reach targeted areas and local communities through efficient and effective deployment of services, (Barr, 1998; Paisley & Richardson, 1998; Anderson et al., 1998).

This raises question why local participation in development process? This is because social and cultural dimensions are crucial to development process. For instance, Porter, Allen, and Thompson (1991) observe and suggest: “a painstaking exegesis of a well-meaning but ill-fated Australian development project in Kenya reveals the reasons for its failure as mainly cultural: past lessons were not learnt, historical local circumstances not examine, indigenous knowledge not harnessed, and the superiority of Western knowledge and experience taken for granted.” In this sense, “culture” is fundamental and needs to be taken seriously in development initiatives particularly for ensuring “more effective and beneficial to those people whose lives are being changed” (Schech, S & Haggis, J (2000).

Other international organizations, especially UNESCO, also see culture as intrinsic to development. The agency states that, “...culture has

increasingly come to be seen as crucial to human development. We understand better not just that culture can be mechanism for, or an obstacle for development, but that it is intrinsic to sustainable human development itself because it is our cultural values which determine our goals and our sense of fulfillment.”¹

In other words, technologies alone are not sufficient to ensure success, which will depend as much on *how* the technologies are deployed, or adopted and the approach by which they are introduced. In fact, some consider that it is far more important to look beyond the technologies to the social, economic and political systems of the community (Garcia and Gorenflo 1998). This is a shift recommended by the FAO (1998). As pointed out by Anderson, “...in our enthusiasm for ICTs and their potential, we should not forget that the focus should be on people, organization and processes rather than on the technologies themselves” (Anderson et. al.1998).

At the same time, however, there have been severe critiques of participatory techniques to be an antidote to failed development projects. On this front, participative processes have been presented as being increasingly overexposed and even abused, serving as technical and management solutions to what are basically political issues (Gujit and Shah 1998:3). This has resulted in community participation being labelled as a ‘sacred cow’ (Blackburn and Holland 1998:2) or worse still, as the “new tyranny” in development practice (Cooke and Kothari 2001). In fact, Mosse (2003:5) suggests that community participation is increasingly seen to “advance external interests and agendas, while further concealing the agency of outsiders.” All of these arguments suggest that “participation all too easily slips into empty rhetoric, [which] can serve the interest of the status quo and can readily lend itself to the fate of being veneered (Gardner and Lewis 2005:356).”

Drawing on arguments made by these two opposing views of participatory development, this chapter highlights the value and limitations

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