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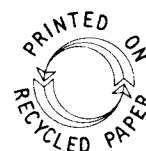
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**DIALECTICAL TRANSFORMATION:
A STUDY OF "DIALOGUE" AS A METHOD
FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
IN A RURAL MILIEU**

M. Hossein Haeri

Centre for Development Studies and Application
Tehran, Iran



This paper by M. Hossein Haeri was first presented at the GPID III Meeting, Geneva, 2-8 October 1978. It can be considered as a contribution to the Dialogues sub-project of the GPID project.

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Johan Galtung

It is being circulated in a pre-publication form to elicit comments from readers and generate dialogue on the subject at this stage of the research.

The truth is that, until recently, researchers working within rural programmes sponsored by the United Nations University, in particular research and development projects, have given little thought to defining and describing the details of the methods they employ in their studies.¹ Thus in the entirety of these studies methodology occupies little place. Nor have any of the research proposals entertained the difficulties and possibilities of the procedures and techniques they so emphatically propose to undertake. Although there have been several techniques suggested by some of the research groups for rural investigations, namely, dialogue, interview, group discussion, etc., and these techniques are unquestionably useful tools conducive to the objectives of rural development programmes, they do not in themselves guarantee reliable results.

There are many variables involved in the process of employing these techniques. More often than not these variables can be so decisive as to alter the outcome of research projects drastically. Sometimes insufficient consideration of these variables may ultimately nullify the initial objectives and intended effects of these studies. Despite this fact, we observe that most scientists involved - or intending to begin work - in rural projects have ignored the practical implications of the methods they employ. Surprisingly enough, in the majority of these instances scientists appear to have taken the problems of reliability of their findings as a matter of course. The important fact, however, we repeat, is that it is the methodology that, from the very outset and the very first encounter with the rural community, determines the outcome of the entire project, be it an investigation towards the "sharing of traditional technologies," an examination of the "goals, processes, and indicators of development," or an attempt to develop technologies

appropriate for rural settings.

The purpose of this study is to present, in a critical perspective, an analysis of the methods we have employed first at Bu-Ali Sina University's Cluster of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resources (CESNAR) and later in the Centre for Ecodevelopment Studies and Application (CENESTA) for our village studies in Iran. The conclusions that are herein derived are entirely based on the empirical observations and the evidence which have been made available by our rather extensive socio-cultural studies and the longitudinal village studies in relation to three projects sponsored by the United Nations University; namely, Goals, Processes, and Indicators of Development (GPID); Research and Development Systems in Rural Settings (R & D); and the project on Sharing of Traditional Technology (STT). This analysis is an attempt to identify and explain various factors which in one way or another influence the dialectical relationship between the research group and the community group, and to examine the nature and direction of their influence. This will enable us, as our final objective, to demonstrate the weaknesses and strengths of dialogue as a method for village studies.

"Dialectical Transformation," a somewhat misleading title, is not a theoretical notion dealing with the conceptual aspects of rural transformation. Nor is it our intention here to present any universally valid generalizations which could be applied towards such an end. The term "transformation" is used here in an exclusively psychological sense; and it refers to the phenomenon which occurs as a result of the combination of two socio-psychological entities.

As in the case of chemical substances, once two personalities with distinct psychological and cultural orientations are combined, they are both altered. A similar process takes place during the encounter between the research group and the community group. Although some degree of this process of mutual altering is inevitable, the final result is not always a desirable one. There are several key factors which determine the nature of the transformation, and sometimes these factors can be so decisive as to retard or halt the process of transformation completely. At the same

time, once properly controlled, these factors can effectively function as powerful positive catalysts.

"Dialectical transformation" is employed here to describe the mutual transformation which takes place as the result of the interaction between the research group and the community group. This process is an essential element which characterizes a "good" dialogue and distinguishes it from ordinary interview situations. In order for the researcher to transcend his/her analysis beyond a purely theoretical level, it is indispensable for him/her to recognize this dialectic principle and observe the importance of factors which affect it. At his/her level of analysis, the researcher must realize that he/she cannot confine him/herself to a mere theoretical treatment of his/her subject; for he himself/she herself is as much in the analysis as his/her subject.

It is by virtue of this very phenomenon of reciprocal alteration and mutual transformation that dialogue can become the most useful tool for rural research. For at bottom, dialogue is a dialectical relationship between the researcher(s)² and the rural community; it is an encounter in which ideas, thoughts, and feelings are interchanged on an equal and distinctly personal level. It is also intrinsically dialectic, because it aims at, and finally culminates in, a third stage, a synthesis which combines and transcends the psychological contents and personalities of both the researcher and the community group.

It is a very difficult task to enumerate and describe each and every variable which either helps or hinders this process. Even if we could assume that such enumeration was possible, we could not generalize our findings beyond the limits of a specific rural area. For rural communities differ from one another in terms of the psychological inclinations and socio-cultural orientations of their members. Thus for the researcher each rural community is a unique case and its investigation requires pioneer work.

For the sake of clarity, and in order to avoid uninvited complications, let us confine our analysis to the procedure we adopted for the development

of R & D systems in rural areas. This procedure consists of three general phases: (1.) identification of needs; (2.) development of means which could effectively satisfy these needs; and finally, (3.) implementation of found solutions. The process, as initially conceived, would not come to a halt at the bottom of this linear order, but rather would repeat itself in a circular or spiral pattern as new needs arise.

It was observed from the start that the most fundamental characteristic of this project was its practicability; that is, the conclusions of each phase are instrumental in the progress of the following phase. Realization of this fact also brought to light the potential threat posed by each phase upon the success of the project as a whole. Thus an erroneous conclusion arising from any one phase of the project would ultimately jeopardize the entire project. Another important fact which had to be considered was that participation of the local community was an indispensable element in the project. Therefore, a concrete methodology was needed which, first, minimized error; and, second, could ensure the maximum participation of the local population. It was then decided that "participatory observation," accompanied by a continuous series of dialogues, was the method which could effectively meet the above two criteria.

The greatest advantage of this method is that it relies heavily on participation of the rural community as its major resource in all three phases of the project, particularly in the first phase, where the foundation of the succeeding phases is laid. As the project proceeds towards its concluding stages, the role of participation of the rural community becomes more critical. Therefore, greater emphasis on participation during the preliminary stages enables us to determine the extent of participation that we can expect from the community during the final stages of the project. Although participation of the rural community is the necessary condition throughout the project, the kind of contribution that it makes differs as we go from one phase of the project to another. The concrete contribution of participation in each phase is thus determined in terms of the function it performs.

In the first phase of the project the function of the community's participation is primarily an "instructive" one. It helps provide the

research group, as well as the community, with sufficient information on the basis of which the true needs and problems of the community are formulated. In the second phase, the role performed by participation is a "collaborative" role. Here, community members become actively involved in the process of defining the local potentialities and deciding the choice of solutions to their problems. Finally, in the third phase of the project, participation assumes a central, decisive position in the project and reaches its maximum functional capacity. In this phase of the project, when solutions are to be implemented, the community does not simply "participate," but leads and controls the action. It is at this point that participation acquires an "operative" role and is transmuted into a powerful element that, through its own momentum, is capable of carrying out the final stages of the project.

Our experience in the field, however, has shown that participation of the community members does not always follow this path. The theoretically ideal path of evolution which we traced above proved far more complicated than it appeared at first. The important fact, and a very unsettling one, is that if R & D systems are to render effective results in the endogenous development of rural communities, then participation of the local community must necessarily continue and evolve in accordance with the requirements of each phase of the project.

In the first phase of the project we relied on "dialogue" as the primary source of information. This phase was carried out simultaneously in a number of villages located in our project area by separate researchers, who were either "social" or "natural" scientists following the same methodology. Following a preliminary general survey of the area, each researcher, or group of researchers, chose one village and "moved in." The timetable was scheduled in a manner that allowed a period of approximately three months for the completion of this phase of the project, including the time actually spent in the villages (3 - 6 weeks). During this period researchers very seldom left the area. Since projects of this nature were unprecedented in the area, it was essential that this new "tradition" be correctly presented to the community. This would also allow the researchers, and the project as a whole, to establish the

right identity from the very outset. Another advantage of this procedure was that during the period of his stay in the village, the researcher would have the opportunity for a closer and more intimate encounter with the organic process of life of the community. This in turn would give the researcher a more realistic and a more objective perspective of the community and help him to understand the underlying social, political, and economic infrastructures and to acquire a more holistic view of the socio-cultural structure of the community. The most significant feature of this procedure, however, was that it generated the right atmosphere for the researcher to indulge in intimate dialogues. It is interesting that the most intriguing dialogues were often taking place among several peasants themselves, spurred on by the illuminative presence of the "researcher."³

At the end of these village studies, and before the project moved into its second phase, some other research groups conducted similar studies in some of the other villages in the area using similar methods. The purpose here was to obtain a more complete view of the area and to recognize some of the pervasive socio-cultural trends and economic patterns. When sufficient information was obtained about these villages, and the results were formulated, a close investigation of the results indicated a noticeable qualitative as well as quantitative variation in the findings. The quality of the information made available by some of the studies was considerably richer than in others. The information yielded by some of these studies was far more detailed and fundamental. As we delved into this problem, we reached another important realization: that the qualitative variation of the results was more considerable on the inter-research group level. Although the results differed as we moved from one village to another, these differences became much greater, in a qualitative sense, as we compared results obtained by one group of researchers with those of another.

The result of this analysis was the revelation of a vital "truth": that the "right" method, used without regard to the specific individual who applies it, does not necessarily guarantee desirable, nor reliable, results. As a matter of fact, in this case the most decisive factors

depended on the person and only a few on the method. Thus our methodological approach, though theoretically infallible, had to be re-examined, this time in terms of the exogenous variables which needed to be included in it.

It can be said with certainty that the most important of these factors is the personality of the researcher: his/her ability to establish the right identity, and to create a motivating atmosphere in order for the members of the community to take an active part in the dialogue and give accurate and unbiased information. The researcher's skill in social performances, such as appropriate approach, ability to persuade, and establishment of a good rapport, etc. are also important, yet only in the sense that a "bad" performance would be detrimental to the entire approach. The researcher must take an active part in the dialogue in order to help the members of the community to construct the right and realistic image of him/her.

As an outsider, the researcher — the person — is immediately the central focus of the community's curiosity. He/she is as much the object of the community's analysis as the community is his/hers, and is just as subject to the community's judgement as the community is to his/hers. The community thus seeks to acquire information about him/her in order to be assured of his/her good intentions. The information that the community has acquired in this manner is then brought into play in the dialogue, which in turn determines the nature and extent of the community's participation.

The immediate reaction of a rural community towards an outsider, and for that matter the reaction of any "closed" socio-cultural system, is that induced by the natural tendency of self-preservation. Mechanisms through which this tendency is manifested differ from one community to another and depend upon the nature and the degree of the intrusion caused by the outsider. Accordingly, the community's reaction may be subtle or overt, mild or even violent; and it may be expressed through mere psychological sanctioning, or in the form of direct physical confrontation.

During the first phase of our project in the project area, where hospitality is generally a deep-seated custom,⁴ our researchers were received with warmth and enthusiasm. The community members readily participated in dialogues with the researchers and responded to questions somewhat freely. An analysis of the results, nevertheless, indicated that a subtle expression of self-preservation was predominantly present during the course of the interviews. Despite the apparent high level of participation, the responses were initially somewhat cunningly formulated and lacked any in-depth information.

It has been said that it is a difficult task to arrive at truth in an Iranian village.⁵ Most researchers who have conducted research in rural areas of Iran have experienced the same difficulty. Concealment of truth, of course, is not an intrinsic characteristic of Iranian villagers. Long periods of oppression and outside adventurism in this country have naturally inclined the villagers to distrust outsiders and conceal the truth from them. One researcher in our team, after four weeks of continuous stay at a village, on the eve of his departure was told by a villager that they had first thought he was a Savak (the Iranian secret police) agent because he was "so friendly" and "asked so many questions." On one occasion, while conducting research on traditional patterns of agricultural organization in a village near Hamadan, the present author was in a similar situation when, after having established intimate relationship with the villagers in the area, he was told by one villager that, "At first I thought you [the author] were an official from the Land Reform Organization and had come to take our land back." It is significant, however, that an experience such as that described by A.K.S. Lambton is, in our experience, far less likely to happen to a "researcher" whose aim is not mere information-gathering about the "target population" but rather a genuine search for authentic, people-oriented, and people-controlled satisfaction of human needs.

One important fact that the researcher must keep in mind is that the encounter between him/her and the community member does not take place in a socio-political vacuum. Both the researcher and the community member are affected by the general socio-political atmosphere in which the

encounter takes place. The more oppressive the political atmosphere is in which the encounter takes place, the stronger will be the tendency towards self-preservation and concealment. Sometimes the impact of such a political predicament can be so great as to make any meaningful and fruitful encounter an impossible task.

In a political atmosphere such as in Iran, this kind of reaction on the part of the community has been quite natural. Indeed, if a rural community is found to behave otherwise we can assume, with good reason, that all is not right. It is up to the researcher, and him/her alone, to break through this barrier. Here, no academic training and professional skill can equip the researcher with the means to create a sure path through this obstacle. The researcher must realize this crucial point: the object of his/her investigation is not so much specific problems, as the people who have these problems. The researcher is usually inclined to demand understanding and accessibility from the community; yet he/she must recognize the truth that this very demand also applies to himself/herself. Therefore, what is demanded here of the researcher is not professional tricks, but his/her total commitment and all the resources of his/her personality.

From the foregoing discussion it becomes apparent that the advantage of dialogue as a method for rural studies is not its application as a technique employed to advance any predetermined truths. Rather, we adopt this method so that the researcher and the community can jointly arrive at truth. This truth, however, is not a truth preconceived by the scientist, but an indeterminate one. It is important for the researcher to realize that in a dialogue it is more important to understand and make the other party understand than to try to satisfy his/her theoretical expectations. The researcher, therefore, must necessarily abandon all preconceived ideas and preformulated hypotheses about the community.

The ideal, of course, would be not to know anything in advance, and not to know any better. But this is impossible. The researcher cannot detach himself/herself completely from his/her experiences and academic orientation; nor is it necessary that he/she do so. The best he/she can

do is to keep his/her professional judgement from interposing itself between him/her and the community and, consequently, obturating his/her channels of perception.

The encounter between the researcher and the community presents an extremely complicated picture, with such startlingly pronounced features that we are often tempted to pick one as the fundamental and most important one. Here, we tried to point out a few variables which are closely connected with this phenomenon. By way of explaining the nature and the direction of the influence exerted by these variables upon the relationship between the researcher and the rural community we have sought to shed some light on this picture as a whole. The object of the foregoing discussion was to demonstrate the fact that dialogue, as an encounter between the researcher and the rural community, and as a process of dialectical transformation, is more than a mere method for collecting information; what is demanded of the researcher during the dialogue is not merely his/her art and superior techniques, but the application and transformation of the whole of his personality.

NOTES

1. With the exception of E.M. Szekely's "R & D Systems in Rural Settings." However, even here we observe definitional and conceptual shortcomings. Although the proposal offers many useful "working hypotheses," it neglects the practical problems of the procedures it proposes for field studies. See E.M. Szekely, "R & D Systems in Rural Settings," November 1977, and the brief critique of it, M.H. Haeri, "Methodological Abstraction and Praxis," April 1978.
2. The term "researcher" here does not refer to any specific category of persons as in the conventional academic hierarchy; it refers to all persons involved in rural research.
3. An example concerned the boluk-chairmen (see M.H. Haeri, M.T. Farvar, et al, "Traditional Rural Institutions and Their Implications for Development Planning: Studies from Hamadan Province of Iran," UN University GPID research paper, 1980) and other elders of the village of Chal'e-Astigan who, under the influence of a dialogue session, re-enacted the decision-making process in the community following the application of the land reform law of 1962. This process has been recorded on tape by T. Moradi.
4. Hospitality is a tradition more or less commonly shared by all villagers in rural Iran. Villagers normally treat outsiders as "guests." It is unlikely that any outsider, without committing a major violation of the community's norms and standards, would receive an unpleasant welcome and, for that matter, would not be given some sort of "tea and sweets."
5. A.K.S. Lambton, The Persian Land Reform (Oxford University Press, London, 1969), p. 96.