

CIDC2006 Conference Paper Abstract details

Title:

Participatory tools and techniques: sharing experiences from a community-based health information systems project

Abstract:

The UThukela District Child Survival Project (TDCSP) was selected by the National Department of Health, in South Africa, as one of three learning sites for the development of a community component of child health in 1999. The design of the child health Community-Based Information System (CBIS) was part of this larger child health project. The premise behind developing a child health CBIS is that vulnerability of children can be tackled using two interconnected strategies. The first is through increasing the awareness and visibility of the situation of children, and the second through mobilising the commitment and action of government and society to address this situation. The process and outcome of the CBIS have previously been documented and the purpose here is not to write about it again. However, whilst sharing the experiences of developing this CBIS I occasionally have spoken about the techniques and tools used, and have generally been surprised at the level of interest that this elicited. This paper therefore shares some of the tools and techniques used in the design and development of a child health CBIS. The popular participatory approaches and methodologies, such as Rural Rapid Appraisal and Participatory Rapid were initially criticised for their technical limitations. These approaches were re-examined to ensure that the techniques used facilitate more equitable participation rather than perpetuating the status quo (Cooke and Kothari, 2002, p.5). More recently in community development programmes, there has been considerable debate around the theoretical, political and conceptual limitations of participation, such as communities being viewed as homogenous (Guijt and Shah, 2001), or the adoption of a simplistic view of power (Kothari, 2002) and insufficient focus on the structural determinants of well-being (Cleaver, 2002; Francis, 2002). Participation, especially in the context of community, is intricately linked to questions of democracy, power and asymmetries that historically exist within communities. Whilst agreeing with most of the objections to previous participatory approaches in community development I feel that the tools and techniques used in participatory IS development should be shared for two reasons. Firstly, there is much talk about participatory design in IS, but very little is written about how to practically get a participatory process started, especially at community level. Secondly, the recognition for a more sensitive approach to heterogeneity of the community and the structural challenges to participation doesn't distract from the necessity of using participatory tools and techniques. Therefore, this paper should not be viewed as the desire to develop some kind of development tool participatory approaches grab bag or "participatory theatre" approach to IS development, but to initiate a dialogue and share experiences on a genuine attempt to really listen to and work with communities. . As with other project team members I came to the CBIS project with my own particular experience and baggage. I came to the field of information systems from a background in the social sciences and in particular with the management of child-health and development projects. Most of the other people had experience in community development projects, but also had the background and work experience in medicine, youth and church projects, social work, and working within the community in different guises. The eclectic nature of the research team is not so unusual in information systems given the multidisciplinary nature of the discipline for "IS researchers are often refugees from other scientific camps. They have brought their own paradigmatic glasses to the IS research community" (Lyytinen, 1985, p. 66). My background, along with that of the research team I was working with, is reflected in the way in which we approached the CBIS project, the choice of theories and concepts used and the research methodology adopted. As is often the case we shared experiences of this within our own circles, but few of us actually documented the tools and techniques used. Some documentation of the

process exists, but most documentation focuses on the output – what came out of this research and is not in the published arena. This paper will focus on just three tools/techniques § Venn diagram tool in a Participatory Learning for Action session. §we used: Participatory evaluation These§VIPP (visualisation in participatory planning). techniques/tools are chosen as they were used at different stages of the research process. The first was used for data collection purposes, the second for data analysis, and the third for assisting with reflection. Bibliography: F. Cleaver, 'Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development', in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds), Zed books, New York, 2002, 36-55. B. Cooke and U. Kothari, 'The Case for Participation as Tyranny', in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds), Zed books, New York, 2002, 1-15. P. Francis, 'Participatory Development at the World Bank: the Primacy of Process', in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds), Zed books, New York, 2002, 72-87. I. Guijt and M. K. Shah. 'Waking up to power, conflict and process'. In I. Guijt and M. K. Shah (eds.), *The Myth of Community. Gender issues in participatory development*, ITDG Publishing, London, 2001, 1-23. U. Kothari, 'Power, Knowledge and Social Control in Participatory Development', in *Participation: The New Tyranny*, B. Cooke and U. Kothari (eds.), Zed books, New York, 2002, 139-152. K. J. Lyytinen. Implications of Theories of Language for Information Systems. *MIS Quarterly*, pages 61–74, March 1985.

Author(s):

Elaine Byrne, University of Pretoria
