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MATERIAL DE DISCUSION
PROGRAMA FLACSO-CHILE
NUMERO 122, Noviembre 1989

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ON PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH, The Calgary Participatory Research Conference.

Marcela Gajardo

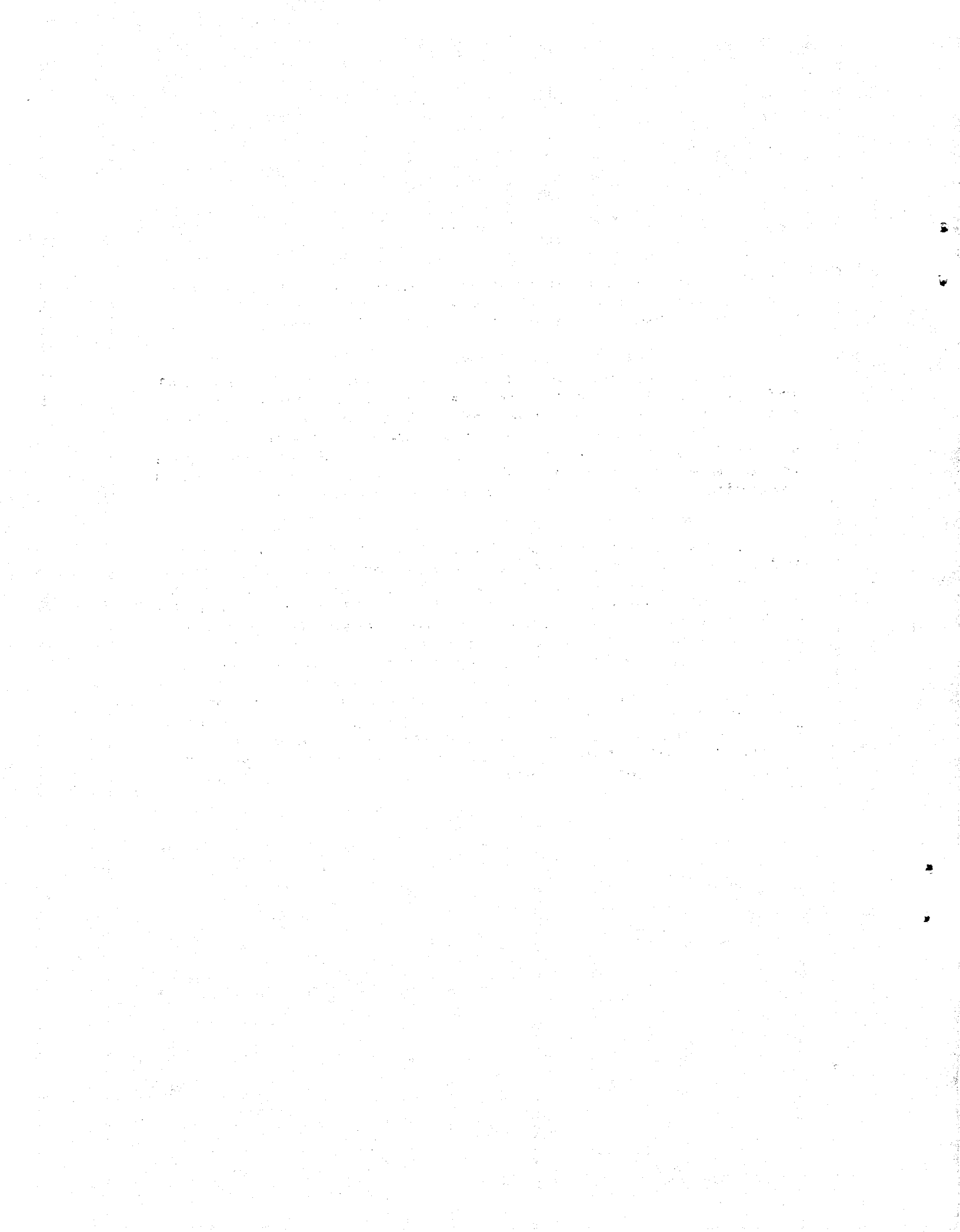
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Summary

This paper contains personal appreciations on some of the issues raised at the Participatory Research Conference, held at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

The Conference aimed at providing both theoretical and practical inputs so as to contribute to the clarification of the nature of participatory research as a basis for community-based development and expected that a useful working definition and relevant methodologies would emerge from a collective discussion of on-going participatory experiences of action and research.

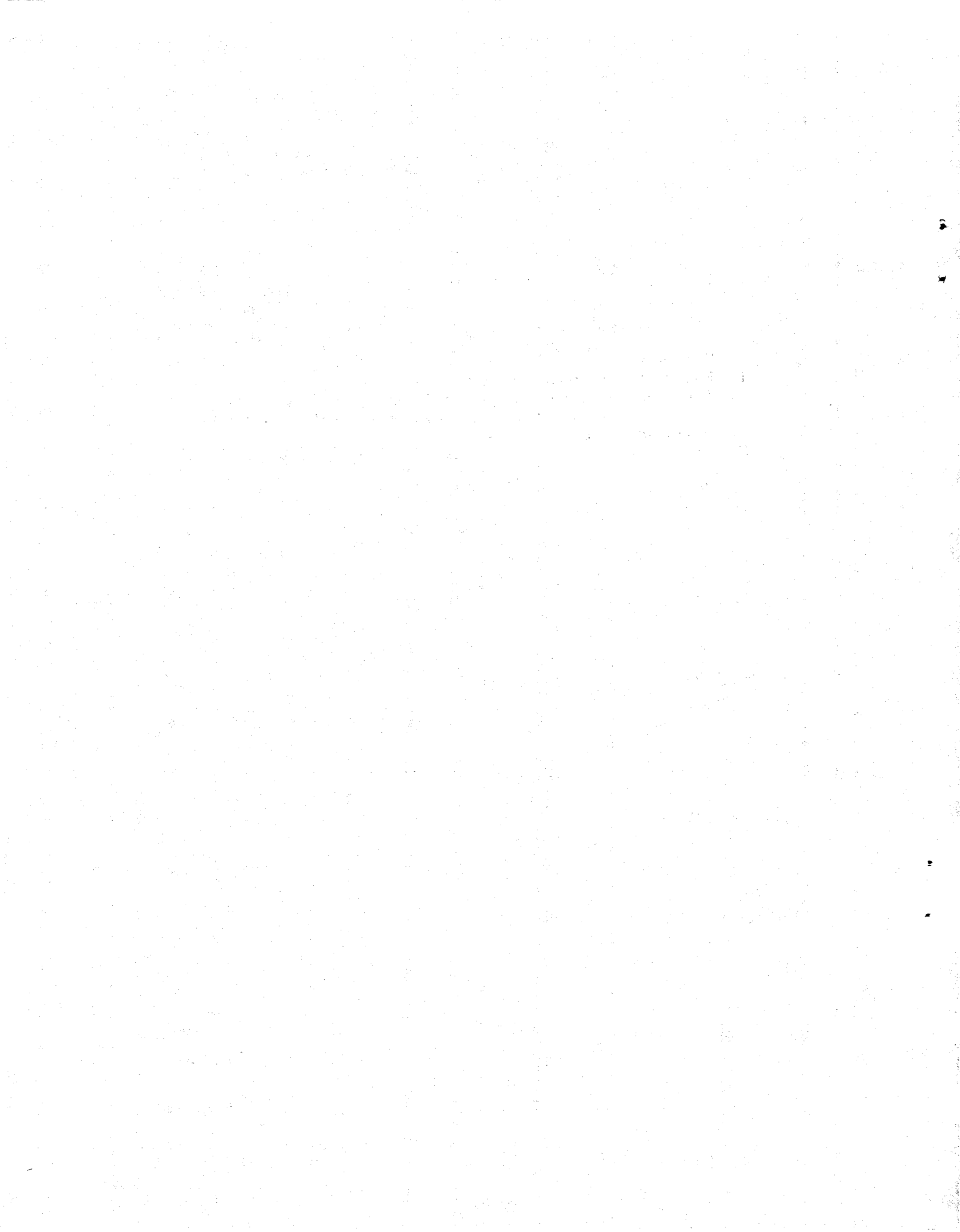
It is our conviction that the Conference provided an excellent forum for a critical and scholarly debate on the theory and practice of participatory approaches to action and research but there is still a long road to walk in order to have this type of research legitimated as a new research paradigm for scientific work. For the time being, participatory approaches to action and research appear as a potential instrument for the emergence of a new system of knowledge production and communication for the underprivileged groups in society. Its contribution to the improvement of life and working conditions of these groups, though, has not yet been proved and requires a serious effort of evaluation and follow-up research.



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1. Background Information.

Do participatory research and development approaches contribute to the inclusion of people's knowledge into the scientific and academic cloisters? Do they empower people's movements and their organizations for a better use of accumulated knowledge? or, instead, for the creation of alternative systems of knowledge production and communication which will effectively contribute to their search for social, political and economic equity? What are the implications of such approaches for conventional scientific research which predominate in most of the academic and scientific settings, both in developed or underdeveloped and dependent countries? Do they share any similarities concerning theoretical assumptions and methodological issues? Concerning research outcomes and its uses for the groups involved in such practices?

These were issues raised by some of the participants at the Participatory Research Conference held at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, from July 12 to July 15, 1989. A meeting attended by more than two hundred practitioners and researchers from across Canada and the United States as well as participants from Australia and some European, African, Asian and Latin American countries. Most of them involved in participatory research and community based development programmes.

An important number of the participants at the meeting were experienced practitioners working with movements emerging from out of the people's own impulses under local leadership. Others were involved in external

interventions to generate grass-root participatory practices. Some of them were experienced academic researchers with a critical interest in the implications of participatory approaches for the development of alternative research paradigms, valid as a coherent set of principles, laws and instruments to approach socio-economic, political and educational change in contexts characterized by growing inequalities and contradictions among the wealthier and the poor. A fact which has generated an increasing feeling of perplexity and skepticism when facing the outcomes of science and technology in overcoming poverty and oppression of underprivileged groups or societies. Or in contributing, through academic research, to the building up of egalitarian and democratic societies which will ensure participation to all and everyone in the running and management of social, political and economic processes.

Last, but not least, there were the students of the University of Calgary, some of them working as facilitators of team groups and talk back sessions, who tried to articulate the differences which emerged from such a diversity of research and development projects and such a variety of people working upon different theoretical assumptions and developing a variety of methodological approaches. Students who tried hard in order to understand the nature of participatory approaches to action and research in its relation to the overall process of participatory development insofar they will be, sometime in the future, faced to similar dilemmas if involved in these kind of social and academic practices.

The Conference's leit-motiv called for the celebration of people's knowledge. A concept which emphasizes upon grass-roots participation and self-reliance, self-awareness and critical thinking as integrally linked to the production of appropriate knowledge and skills for basic sustenance, breakdown of dependence from institutional powers and mobilization and organization of the underprivileged in order to articulate basic socio-economic and political demands and take actions in order to influence review and decision making policies at national, regional or local levels. Socially relevant knowledge produced and disseminated by groups who live and work under conditions of poverty and oppression as opposed to scientific knowledge produced at the universities or governmental and non-governmental academic centres when oriented to the maintenance of the statu-quo.

As far as the Conference's convocation read participatory approaches of research and development were one of the various means or instruments to achieve such goals. It is in this context that, when referring to the purposes of the Conference, its organizers expected to draw generalizations from the study of selected cases of participatory research and development programmes and obtain useful working definitions of such a concept, its nature and methodologies as well as to contribute to a constructive review of the theory and practice of participatory approaches to social, economic and

political change.¹

This explains some of the issues raised at the Conference which, in my belief, remained as unsolved dilemmas for the future of these practices due to lack of an analytical framework or categories which could enable the participants to draw principles, values and assumptions shared by the different case studies and draw generalizations which could help in defining the nature of a series of academic and social practices which locate action and research, knowledge production and communication, in the perspective of promoting grass-root participation, raising self-awareness and self-reliance of the underprivileged groups and promoting their participation in social, political and economic change.

2. The Conference's organization.

The Conference was organized upon a number of selected case studies presented by researchers and practitioners currently active in using participatory approaches in community or locally based development programmes and operating upon, what the Conference

¹The Conference had an explicit and an implicit agenda. The one referred to in previous paragraphs refers to the implicit objectives. Explicit ones were oriented towards providing a forum for critical analysis and constructive exchange among researchers and practitioners of participatory research, identify relevant methodologies of participatory research and gain clarification of the theory and practice of participatory research.

regarded as, successful programmes. It included experiences from Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, Great Britain. Also Thailand, the Philippines, Nepal and Sri Lanka from Asia as well as Mexico from Latin America.

The institutional context of the case studies were different in nature and, consequently, determined their characteristics as well as their social and political purposes.

A significant number of the studies were located within university environments or academic settings oriented towards knowledge production and communication in close relationship with the needs and interests of grass-root and workers organizations. With their history, their traditions and accumulated knowledge as well as their interests and needs.

A second group of cases were government sponsored projects, in close partnership with universities or other academic centres, implementing community-development oriented projects, integrated rural development programmes or similar projects in the areas of health, nutrition, dwelling, education or other areas of concern directly related to the improvement of life and working conditions of the poor within the possibilities offered by the application of national or regional development programmes. In such cases participatory research practices appeared to be one of the various components of wider project, designed with experimental purposes to be later adopted as part of national public development policies. In this context, external interventions were

mostly designed to integrate the underprivileged groups to existing programmes and policies rather than to generate participatory grass-root practices and encourage people's organizations.

Last, but not least, there were those projects carried out by non-governmental organizations propitiating endogenous development, local autonomy and self-reliance. Such cases were presented in its close association with grass-root community organizations and social movements in opposition to those cases which were carried out within the universities or the governmental decision-making contexts. Research, in these cases, was also understood as a component within a larger process of community-based development but mainly used as a feed-back instrument to revaluative mechanism for the people's movements and organizations.

2.1. University or Academic contexts.

Within the first context were the cases of Canada, Australia and Great Britain. Canada presented three different case studies undertaken by researchers and practitioners from the Continuing Education Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Dene Cultural Research Centre and the University of Calgary. England presented the accumulated experience of the External Department at the University of Leeds choosing to focus on a number of participatory projects, different in their origins, organization and outcomes, being its most outstanding characteristic the groups with which they work. Namely,

local trade unionists, unemployed people and community activists. This is to say socially organized groups with a defined profile and grouped around specific interests and needs, a fact which frequently raises a number of contradictions concerning the role of the universities and the education of the working class in the British society. Australia, in its turn, presented two case studies. A larger one related with the development and protection of human rights and a community-based development programme related with an aboriginal education experience approached from the perspective of Western and aboriginal participants and the dilemmas confronted in conducting cross-cultural action research from monocultural western educational institutions and their attendant course accreditation structures.²

2.2. Governmental sponsored projects.

The case studies of Thailand, the Philippines and Nepal may be included in the context of government sponsored programmes which also include the participation of the universities and their researchers as well as local authorities and local leaders. Thailand's presentation accounted for the application of the so-called Basic Minimum Needs approaches to community health, formerly a component of the Rural Integrated

²Information taken from the summary case presentations provided by the Conference and from Forrester, K., et. al., The potential and limitations: Participatory research in a university context. Background paper prepared for the Participatory Research Conference, Mimeo, 1989, pp.1-2.

Development Programme, now expanded into a national quality of life programme which includes research practices along the improvement of health and nutrition in selected deprived communities of the country. The Philippines presented the CHILD and CIPs project, developed within the public policies of the Institute of Primary Health Care in partnership with non-governmental organizations. The project is based upon a community organization and local economic development and has a participatory research component which does not account for the overall project. As they themselves put it in their summary presentation the problems and issues related to research activities within these projects are linked to the resources and limitations as well as the vision of the Institute of Primary Health Care, that of stimulating the improvement in the quality of life of the Filipino people by building organized, caring communities capable of transforming their own situations through participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation process in partnership with both the government and non-government organization with the hope that these development efforts will lead to social change and eventual national transformation.³

Nepal was also a governmental sponsored community-development project seeking to explore the community potential of awareness and self-development through a small pilot project in a nepalese district. As in the case of the Philippine project it is a collaborative

³Information taken from the summary presentation of the case study provided by the Conference.

program which involves the University of Calgary and Tribhuvan University in Nepal experimenting innovative procedures at local level in order to support future primary health care/local participation in different districts of the country.*

2.3. Non-governmental experiences.

The non-governmental efforts to promote social and political organization at grass-root levels were represented by the cases of the U.S.A., Sri Lanka and Mexico. The United States were represented through the activities developed by the Highlander Research and Education Center, a 55 year old institution working to provide education for empowerment of low income citizens in Appalachia and the South. Highlander conducts training workshops at its residential center and in the field to enable grassroots community-based organizations to act for themselves on pressing issues in their communities. Throughout the years Highlander have evolved in accordance with the changes occurring at national and local level. First, struggling for human rights and later engaged in the struggle for civil rights they are actually engaged in exploring ways of using participatory approaches of action and research in order look for collective solutions to the resurgence of poverty in the Appalachian region, formerly an industrialized area and nowadays impoverished as a result of changes in the

*Ibid.

national and international economic systems.⁵

Sri Lanka, although opposed to the U.S.A. concerning its position in the economic world wide scenery and its developmental characteristics, presented the experience of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement born 30 years ago with the purpose of acting as an awakening force at community level organization. In the movement's history economic development is not considered to be an isolated activity but as an integral part of an awakening process of individuals, families, village and urban communities, clusters of villages, the nation and the world community as a whole.⁶ A sequence of stages takes the people from an initiation and psychological infrastructure development stage to an income, employment generation and self financing and sharing stage and the experience is based on assumptions which suppose the building up of a new social and political order from below to above.

Something similar is intended by the Mexican representatives, namely working at the Centre for Community Action Research in the State of Morelos. This is a relatively new project when compared with other projects carried out in other Mexican States as well as with the multiplicity of on-going projects in latinamerican countries, a continent with a wide variety of projects based on participatory approaches to social action and research. These approaches, although old in

⁵Ibidem.

⁶Ibidem.

history, acquired a theoretical and methodological status in these countries in the late fifties and early sixties. Nowadays, two streams may be clearly perceived. One emerging from the adult educational practices and consciousness raising processes initiated by Paulo Freire in Brazil and one emerging from the so-called critical sociology paradigms raised by Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia. Although initially divergent these mainstreams tend to converge while we assist to the emergence of new approaches which, although recognizing the past experiences, tend to build their own experiences in a theoretical and methodological vacuum and ignore the social and political implications of action and research for the democratic future of quite a number of latinamerican countries.

3. The nature of participatory research approaches.

The quest for participation oriented towards social and political transformation based on people's knowledge, interests and needs, as well as the construction of alternative theories and research paradigms that will contribute to a better comprehension of social and political problems have always been, the double-fold purpose of participatory approaches to action and research. As recognized today by most researchers, research is always and by logical necessity based on moral and political valuations and the researcher should be obliged to account for this explicitly.⁷

⁷G. Myrdal. Cfr. In A. Rahman, Grass-Roots Participation and Self-Reliance, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1984.

In these terms the opening session of the Conference was a success when introducing participatory approaches to action and research as a value-biased practice, as all types of research. Biased when standing for the value that people should take action to improve their social and economic status, that they have the right to produce their own knowledge and that this knowledge passes through social verification, when the people withdraw from action for review and decision-making, and this does not make this process less scientific than other types or methods of research.

Value-biased, too, in terms of the relationship established between researchers and the people for whom research is done as well as in the methodologies used to generate socially useful knowledge for the under-privileged groups in society.

Problems arose when facing the task of drawing some general principles, values and beliefs from the case studies and drawing a useful working definition of participatory research, its nature and relevant methodologies.

This would have been important not only in terms of the Conference's outcomes and future activities but in terms of reaching a relative consensus -not among the cases and their contexts- but among those researchers using participatory approaches and those for whom this kind of approach may not be a truly scientific one either

due to its theoretical assumptions or due to methodological biases. Among such biases, the verification system and the contribution of this kind of research to the critical growth of knowledge. So much for its contribution to the elaboration of alternative theories and research paradigms which, based on the participation of the people in the overall research process, may be replicable in other settings or contexts and its results generalized as valid proposals for more than a single group or single collectivity.

Accuracy, validity and replicability of the knowledge produced as well as the rigorous evaluation of the uses of research are not a prerogative of the so-called scientific or academic research. They are also principles shared by the participatory approaches to action and research but, it seemed at the Conference, that they have not been worked out in such a way that they are understood and respected by those who have decided for other types of research (i.e. applied research, research and development or basic research). Besides, these approaches have not succeeded in being recognized and legitimated within the academic community as a valid approach to knowledge production and communication or to regional and local planning and decision-making processes.

The micro or small-scale nature of the cases, the lack of systematization, the impossibility of building upon accumulated knowledge as well as little or no clarification of the way in which the social actors are incorporated to the overall process of action and

research may have contributed to the false dichotomy between scientific and participatory approaches to scientific inquiry, particularly in the social and political sciences sphere.

A false dichotomy because participatory research approaches do not necessarily imply the full participation of the actors in knowledge production and communication. There are differentiated roles in these processes and the researcher must assume his own responsibility in the task of articulating demands and systematizing produced knowledge and its dissemination. The important thing to preserve is the people's movements control over the definition of the problem, the social relevance of produced knowledge and the uses of such knowledge so as to ensure its effective contribution to the improvement of their life and working conditions and their overall participation in decision-making processes. In its turn, researchers should contribute to the theoretical construction of social and political practices and offer a rigorous critique and explanation to those who believe that the world of relationships and social processes is readily apparent to any observer.

One of the most illuminating contributions on this concern has been done by Orlando Fals Borda being a major focus of his work the legitimization of people's knowledge within the scientific community as well as his continuous efforts to develop alternative paradigms that will help in the people's struggle for social transformation. Well known as the "father" of critical (or radical) sociology in Latin America, Fals Borda is

one of the researchers who has contributed to clear up epistemological problems in social and political research as well as the nature of participatory approaches in building up new relations in knowledge production and communication.

Although participating at the Conference very little of his experience could be used in order to raise critical issues related to participatory approaches and macro-social structure, as well as participatory approaches own tensions and role concerning value-biases, objectivity, accuracy and replicability. In fact, some of these issues were raised in informal conversations among participants and brought to collective discussion from time to time.

With this in mind, it may be said that within the relationship between theory and practice, the problems arising from practice predominated over theoretical and methodological issues. Rather than taking the case studies as an instrument to provoke a collective debate on the nature and implications of participatory approaches to action and research, questions were addressed to the case presenters trying to unsolve problems which were directly linked to the diversity of social, economic and cultural contexts not easily understood by such a variety of participants. The debate was then kept on the epiphenomena rather than moving towards more substantive issues related to the theory and practice of participatory research.

4. Methodological Issues.

One of the objectives of the Conference was to identify relevant methodologies of participatory research. For this purpose participants were divided into different theme groups, among them health, spirituality, gender, environment and socio-political and economic aspects.

Grouping by areas of concern could have effectively contributed to a debate on the methodological implications of participatory research. Among them the participation of the people's movements in the different stages of planning and executing action and research. Most participatory approaches imply that those whose problems constitute the focus of research join the process of defining the problem, collecting and analyzing the data and deciding upon the uses of the outcomes of research. The problem of people's influence and control on the relevance of produced knowledge for action rather than their participation in the different stages of a research project could have been another issue for debate.

But these topics did not arise in the group discussions or talk back sessions. The tendency was to focus on the case study as such rather than to issues related to the quest for participation and its methodological implications. Again, some analytical categories for team work could have helped in overcoming this fragmented debate and incorporating the contributions of the different groups in an integrated

perspective. Although this was intended later, in the workshop which followed the Conference, little could be done in order to draw generalizations from the different cases, a task which will probably have to be assumed, sometime in the future, by the organizing committee.

It was said that it was difficult to obtain an overall view of the nature, scope and objectives of each of the case studies. It was even more difficult to try to isolate their methodological approach, and stages, in the research oriented ones as well as to identify the linkages of action and research in those cases where research was a partial component and the case presented by its practitioners. Even in a case like the Mexican one, a well known society for a latinamerican observer, it was difficult to determine whether or not there was a research component in the experience or this dealt mainly with participatory planning for local development. An activity which also requires people's knowledge and people's participation but which is quite different from the nature and scope of research, either participatory or not.

Something similar happened with the Sri Lanka case study being the difference that this movement does not pretend to be a participatory research one but a participatory movement oriented towards the construction of a new social order in their country. Even more, when asked about the contribution of the movement to participatory research strategies the presenter's answer was that he was not a researcher but the movement was open to all kinds of research as long as it served the

people's needs and interests.

It was easier to see the linkages between action and research in those case studies which are being developed in university environments or academic settings. And although they said to face a series of contradictions concerning the "scientific" nature of their work it was relatively easy to observe a systematic search for breaking through the monopoly of academic knowledge and bringing people's knowledge into the academic cloisters. Nevertheless these seemed to be small groups within the universities, working either in university extension programmes or adult education departments. Research, teaching and extension are the main components of an institution of higher education, at least in the latinamerican countries. There is enough freedom in this context to bring into the cloisters the fresh air of daily life as lived by the underprivileged and the social minorities. The challenge, in this case, is how to legitimate such practices either as an alternative approach to scientific work or as a methodological procedure which can be used to support those actions undertaken by social actors to struggle for their rights or for the improvement of their life and working conditions. This may be or may be not a joint venture among the researchers and the people's movements. The task of validating and legitimating these approaches within the scientific and academic community, though, is a difficult task to be assumed by researchers on their own.

The research component was also relatively easy to

see in the government sponsored projects. The question here is whether these projects are participatory in nature or not. This was frequently raised by the participants either at the plenary sessions or at the team group discussions. It is known that political, economic and social contexts may or may not enable people's participation or the development of projects which aim at raising self-consciousness, self-reliance and promoting grass-root organizations. At least in Latin America many have paid this effort with their lives if not with imprisonment and torture.

In spite of this there are always certain possibilities of using participatory approaches as an awakening force or as a means to improve the living conditions of the poorer groups. The extent in which these will be successful experiences depends of the political will to adopt some measures that will effectively contribute to increase the income of the poor or to organize these groups for a better use of resources which are coming through institutional channels. In most of the cases, participatory approaches to action and research were designed as external interventions inserted within developmental projects and oriented towards the verification of the people's potential to put forward their demands and to organize themselves in a search for collective solutions to common problems. Further, these cases were community-based development programs working with the community as a whole rather than with socially organized groups with common interests within the community. A fact which raises a series of considerations concerning the impact of the projects particularly in

those societies which are moving towards national goals of social, political and economic change.

5. Final remarks.

All of the participants with which it was possible to interact were favorably impressed by the organization of the Conference and by the scholarly discussion of a very new and complex phenomenon. The Conference succeeded in demystifying the ideological aura surrounding people's knowledge and the theory and practice of participatory approaches to action and research as well as in clarifying its use in widely different socio-political and cultural contexts by groups and institutions with differing social objectives.

Nevertheless it is important to point out that the analysis was done at a rather high level of generality, talking of the practice in its relation to participatory approaches to social change and development rather than looking at the implications of these practices for research and for the future of participatory research projects. As such, participatory research, as most participatory approaches to social and political action, continue to be an unfinished agenda both in its conceptualization and its practice.

To me this represents a very basic concern and I presume it should be so for those who are funding these type of research projects. I do stand for the promotion of self-reliance, awareness and organization of deprived classes who feel inferior because of the relations of

material as well as knowledge production. I do defend a close relationship of researchers and practitioners, of theory and practice. I appreciate all efforts leading to launch initiatives to develop the autonomous forces of the underprivileged and the social minorities, thus turning them into conscious subjects pushing beyond the designs of the researchers. And I expect that more and more researchers will be touched by the thought, perhaps strengthened by some concrete field experiences, that such approaches are needed to promote social transformation and the building up of an egalitarian social order.

But I also stand for the clarification and explicitation of the theoretical and methodological assumptions which underlie these approaches, for the search of shared principles and values or a basic consensus among researchers who are involved in this kind of research as well as to learn from other standpoints and approaches so as to find out, as M. Zachariah once put it, the way the world really works for which critical awareness and critical analysis are essential.²

The critical evaluation of an international meeting may be done from a series of standpoints being one of them the evaluation that the organizing committee will do of the Conference. Probably, there will also be the evaluation of the case study presenters and the facilitators. And the one of some other participant

²May 1988 Workshop Summary. Information provided by the Conference.

observer, like myself, hoping to contribute for the future of participatory approaches to action and research.

This is a personal evaluation of a process. But something in the process has not been mentioned yet. And that is the opportunity offered to us by IDRC and the University of Calgary of getting acquainted with all these experiences, listening and getting to know people from such a diversity of cultural contexts, learning that poverty and oppression are not a prerogative of dependant countries and that, in many places, things do not differ much when we speak of the living and working conditions of the groups who have been excluded from social and economic benefits as well as political participation.

These lessons are as valuable as the Conference itself and its contribution to the growth of critical knowledge concerning participatory approaches to action and research. I left Calgary with the feeling of having interacted with two movements: a social movement, working at grass-root level, and an intellectual movement with its roots at centres devoted to research. Both of them involved in the exploration and practice of alternative methodologies of action and research particularly related to the problems of social inequalities and socio-economic injustices. At times, I had the feeling that they were convergent in their efforts to look for collective responses to the growing crisis of contemporary world. At times I had the feeling we were going in different directions. Nevertheless I believe a step forward has been given towards the establishment of closer

relationships among practitioners and researchers in order to work on a type of research which has to build its own spaces and to struggle for its survival upon the bases of elaborating solid frameworks and methodologies that will effectively contribute to a better comprehension of the role of knowledge production and communication in its contribution to the construction of an egalitarian social and economic order.

