Participatory ‘Guru’ – Robert Chambers

Robert Chambers is an academic and development practitioner who has, since the 1980s, been one of the leading advocates for putting the poor, destitute and marginalised at the centre of the processes of development policy. He popularised with development circles such phrases as "putting the last first" and stressed the now generally accepted need for development professionals to be critically self aware. The widespread acceptance of a "participatory" approach is in part due to his work.

Robert Chambers was born in the year 1932 and has an academic background in biology, history and public administration. Educated at the Universities of Cambridge and Manchester, he joined Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in 1972 and has worked extensively with development organisations both in India and abroad, including membership of the Band Aid/Live Aid Project Committee and the Advisory Panel on Agriculture, Forestry and Environment for the World Commission on Environment and Development.

Robert Chamber's work has included aspects of rural development, public administration training, seasonality, irrigation system management, agricultural research and extension, perceptions and poverty, professionalism and participation. His main operational and research experience has been in East Africa and South Asia.

By the early 1980’s, there was growing dissatisfaction among development experts with both the reductionism of formal surveys, and the biases of typical field visits. In 1983, Robert Chambers used the term Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) to describe techniques that could bring about a 'reversal of learning'. This pioneering work of Robert Chambers was one example of an attempt to include the interests of the poor in the design of programmes and projects. The importance of RRA was that it recognized the need to consult the poor on their needs.

Two years later Robert Chambers coined the word Rapid Rural Appraisal, the first international conference to share experiences relating to RRA was held in Thailand. This was followed by a rapid growth in the development of methods that involved rural people in examining their own problems, setting their own goals, and monitoring their own achievements. By the mid 1990’s, the term RRA had been replaced by a number of other terms including ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)’ and ‘Participatory Learning and Action’ (PLA). RRA is mainly seen as a means for outsiders to gather information; and hence, the need to replace or supplement it with participatory rural appraisal (PRA) which empowers the local people. PRA is a method that facilitates the community's own in-depth look at themselves and of their possibilities, and enables them to articulate these discoveries in their own colorful, meaningful, useable and realistic way. Perhaps because of the work of Robert Chambers and other development practitioners advocating the shift in development thinking embodied in the PRA approach, many agencies, governments and financial institutions now prescribe the use of PRA in their development programmes. There is now a wealth of experience and insights with which to view, define and practice PRA.

Chambers acknowledges that the significant breakthroughs and innovations that informed the methodology were not his, but that development practitioners in India, Africa and elsewhere were responsible for this. Many Practitioners in India and other countries collaborated with Chambers to explore emerging techniques and tools. Chambers raised funding for South-South Exchanges which were seminal to the internationalization of the PRA community of practice. Another well known innovation taken up by Robert Chambers through IDS is Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) program, a participatory approach for the total elimination of open defection, holds promise of major gains in enhancing the wellbeing of women, children and men and in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. This program was started in Bangladesh and has been spread in varying degrees in India, Cambodia, Indonesia, China and Nepal. To a limited degree, it has also been experimented in some African countries.

During his development journey, Robert Chambers wrote many books which became handbooks for many development workers. His books include Rural Development: Putting the last first (1983), Challenging the Professions (1993), Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last (1997), Participatory Workshops (2002) and Ideas for Development (2005).

Robert Chambers is currently at the Institute of Development Studies, UK as a Research Associate in the Participation, Power and Social Change Team. He is currently working mainly on participatory methodologies, how we know, do not know, and get it wrong in development, community-led total sanitation, and personal and institutional learning and change. As a pioneer of participatory methods, Robert Chambers has influenced the development scenario across the world and is recognized as a key contributor to the development arena by facilitating the participation of the community in their own development.

*Information till June-2010