

Connecting to the 'Last First': Call for Participatory Action Research in C4D to reach the outliers of Kerala Model

Communication & Journalism Research
12 (1) pp 43-62
©The Author (s) 2023
Reprints and Permissions:
masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

Venkitesh S. *

Research Scholar, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Kerala

Rajesh Kumar B. M.

Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Kerala

Abstract

With its high Human Development Index (HDI) values, participatory and decentralization approaches, the Kerala development model has often projected an image of the State as a holistically developed community. Development studies have thrown light on the lived experiences of outliers in the Kerala model. New theoretical, policy-oriented, and action research methods emerged to identify factors inhibiting social change and their solutions. Alternate paradigms emerged in the Communication for Development (C4D) and Communication for Social Change (CFSC) disciplines, along with economic, sociological, and political domains. In the C4D arena, the technological deterministic one-way communication model alternated with participatory methods. This participatory technique was combined with the framework of ethnography to construct Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) methods for implementing Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) initiatives and their impact assessment. The Kerala development model is known for its decentralization schemes and participatory approach in the field of communication too. Nevertheless, scholars are yet to explore studies on communication infrastructure among marginalized groups and the relationship between communication and development. In the backdrop of Covid-19, most of the services the government provided moved into the online sphere in the internet-active State. At this juncture, this paper tries to root in the theoretical framework of 'Putting the Last First' and Dreze's action research to suggest methods to understand where the marginalized stand with respect to communication infrastructure. In 2022, the Government of Kerala introduced a new index to identify absolute poverty. With the theoretical framework of 'Putting the Last First' and action research, this paper tries to elucidate the need to apply EAR methods at the micro-level to understand the communicative ecologies of marginalized groups for planning and evaluating C4D initiatives.

Keywords

Action Research, Ethnographic Action Research, Putting Last to the First, C4D, Communication for Social Change

* Correspondence: venkiteshshaji123@gmail.com

Introduction

Kerala has been lauded for its good values while measuring the development indicators. High literacy levels, better health indices, and overall high quality of life indices of the State, popularly known as the Kerala development model, have been rigorously discussed in academia. This model was tagged as a success, and the success attributed to the participatory rural approaches and decentralization, which led to public action (Sen & Dreze, 1989). The model had been critiqued for not reaching the marginalized sections of the state. Kurien (1995) pointed out that the Kerala development model has its 'outliers'. In the development discourse of Kerala, the marginalized groups include the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, children, old persons, and persons with disabilities (Jaleel, 2016). Jaleel adds that newly marginalized groups, such as migrant labourers and LGBTQ, emerged. Critiquing Dreze and Sen, Martinez-Rodriguez et al. (2020) point out that they do not even mention the penurious social situation of the marginalized social groups in Kerala society, namely, Adivasis, Dalits, fisherfolk, and to some extent, women. However, these are a broad classification of marginalized groups. The Dalits and Adivasis can be classified further based on their living conditions and cultural identities. The digital divide among the tribes in the 'internet-active' state has been studied extensively in the communication and development field. In the post-Covid scenario, with many of the government services shifted to online mode, the accessibility of marginalized sections towards these services has to be studied extensively. A study by Sihas and Nair conducted among tribals in Wayanad after the introduction of online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic observes that while measures have been taken to ensure digital facilities for the marginalized communities to attend the virtual classes, it is argued that these actions would not yield the desired outcome unless the most basic socio-cultural, economic and geographical barriers are addressed. This indicates that a gap still exists between the development facilitators and marginalized communities in Kerala.

The concept of development is challenging to define flawlessly. The early models and tools used to measure development and solve development issues perceived development as economic growth and modernization. This dominant paradigm was critiqued, and alternate paradigms were introduced in the development discourse. Third-world scholars challenged the euro-centered economic growth and modernization theory and introduced the dependency theory. Further, this dependency theory faced a challenge from core-periphery phenomena within a nation or community. From the criticism of both paradigms, a new viewpoint on social change has come to the forefront, examining the changes from the self-development of the local community. Sen

and Dreze (1989) argued for a capability approach in the development discourse, in which Sen (1999) asserted development as 'freedom.' This notion of development indicates the need to enhance individuals' capability and freedom to participate in the economic and political process. From Dreze's point of view, participation in the economic and political process connotes public or social action toward social change. Subsequently, Dreze (2017) proposed action research in the development field for initiating social action to enhance social change.

According to Jan Servaes, the general typology of the development paradigms is visible at the communication and cultural levels. The dominant economic development paradigm coincided with Lerner's modernization theory and Rogers' Diffusion of innovation theory. Newer perspectives in development communication reviewed these models as top-down approaches and regarded them as limited.

The participatory model incorporates the concepts in the framework of multiplicity. It stresses the importance of the cultural identity of local communities and democratization and participation at all levels. Paulo Freire (1983) refers to this as all people's right to speak their word individually and collectively. According to Servaes, the most developed form of participation is self-management. This model of development communication is congruent with the self-development theory suggested by Sen. Quoting Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo-Estrada, Servaes sums up that two crucial factors often determine the successes and failures of most development projects, that is, communication and people's involvement.

The major criticism faced by the participatory model in the 1970s was that external agencies predetermined the development goals. Parfitt (2004) suggested an ambiguity in the conception of the participatory approach, whether it is a means or an end. He further explains this as development project design (including the definition of project goals and targets), and management will be left mainly in the hands of the traditional authorities, while the role of those mobilized to participate will simply be to rally around to work for the predetermined goals of the project. The aim of projects introducing to the rural communities in a nation-state was to achieve the Millenium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which were set by the United Nations (UN) Organizations, mainly funded by 'developed' nations, is to improve the SDG index of the nation-state. Power relations between aid donors and recipients remain the same as in traditional top-down development models. The annual Human Development Report published by the UN in 2016 finds that although average human development improved significantly across all regions from 1990 to 2015, one in three people

worldwide continues to live in low levels of human development. This report further explains the prevalence of gender, race, and ethnic discrimination worldwide.

Despite the participatory models termed as democratic to bring social change, many scholars cite the emergence of more marginalized sections. In Chambers' words, however much the rhetoric changes to 'participation,' 'participatory research,' 'community involvement,' and the like, an outsider still seeks to change things. He points out an example that facilitators of the participatory model see agricultural production as an end, regardless of whether poor people can grow or buy the food themselves. Dreze, in his work *'Sense and Solidarity'*, points out the relation between large quantities of food grain hoardings in Food Corporation of India storehouses and the existence of hunger and poverty in rural India. Thus, Dreze puts forward action research as a method for social change. Chambers says putting the poorer rural people first reorders outsiders' thinking so that what before was seen as ends are now seen as means - means to the over-arching objective of enabling the poorest to demand and control more of what they want and need. With the conceptual framework of the *'Putting the Last First'* theory of Chambers and action research suggested by Dreze, this paper looks forward to pointing out the outliers of the Kerala development model and the need for action research in the Communication for Development field among these marginalized sections to understand the needs and solutions of the community. The paper also tries to elucidate the methods of action research that can be used in the C4D field in the State in the post-Covid scenario.

Putting the Last First

Chambers explained the idea of 'Putting the Last First' based on eradicating rural poverty, a life sustenance element that improves the quality of life. He cited the researchers' bias in determining the causes of poverty and the solutions to eradicate it. He criticized the concentration of power in the core and the decisions regarding the needs of the marginalized sections decided by the people in the core. He emphasized the need to identify the soft-spots, the points in the network where alterations are likely to have more profound effects on a system than others. From a broader perspective, these soft-spots do not have to be exclusively related to poverty. Assume this as any point in the network which inhibits development. According to Chambers, these soft-spots must be located by careful analysis case by case. The researcher should search for opportunities that eventually generate an agenda for action. He continues his criticism as if the researchers and other outsiders failing to identify the soft-spots and search for opportunities will result in the mere treating symptoms of poverty, not the cause of it. He also points to the presence

of local elites in the community who act as the voice of everyone and depict their interests as that of the community. The presence of local elites, the need for identifying soft-spots for alteration, and the flaws of the top-down model pointed out by Chambers. He presents the participatory model of 'Putting the Last First,' which suggests the need for identifying the poorest among the rural and bringing change to this last individual of the power structure. He implies that outsiders - such as researchers, agriculture extension officers, economists, facilitators, and developmental agencies- must deconstruct the values and beliefs about the rural poor to consider the poorest of the community. Chambers put it in this way, "analysis by the researcher, with the poor, of the nature and extent of deprivation, of the forces that sustain it, and the opportunities for attacking it can sharpen the strategies of intervention." However, he says that analysis and strategies are the easier part, but bringing changes in values and behavior is complex. He sums up that the reversals of certain existing notions could bring change. Spatial reversals that decentralize power from core to periphery and the reversal of values that the researchers learn along with the poor could bring change. However, the local elites in the rural become the power center again, and the poorest will remain the poorest again. He also points out that there is a gap between the disciplines that ethnography deals only with the community's anthropology, science and technology do not bother with the human capacity to deal with technological enhancement and sociology deals with the human capacity alone, not the technological diffusion. Hence, this demands bridging the gap between discipline and the essentiality of interdisciplinary research.

Further, while analyzing the problem, the researcher has to consider the question of 'Who gains and who loses'? Chambers indicates that most of the programs implementing for the rural poor are non-frontal, which is gain for all - the outsiders, local elites, and the rural poor. Conventionally this was attributed to the lack of political will among the rural poor. However, Chambers reverses this; he sees the non-frontal approaches as the lack of political will among the outsiders that the rich failed to act against their interests. He emphasizes the need for a more frontal approach to push benefits more to the poorer, where the less poor must lose. For him, 'Putting the Last First' means the professionals work in the rural, they reflect reversals of power towards the periphery, their analyzes and actions pass the boundaries of disciplines, they find new opportunities for the poor, and they are ready to learn with them. They have to span across two cultures, academia, and practice, acknowledging criticism from the academia and incorporating vision and action from practice. Based on the level of individual freedom and power, most opportunities are for small steps and pushes that may seem insignificant, but the sum of all actions makes excellent movements. To put the last first,

professionals must confront their beliefs, challenge personal values, and exercise imagination. A reversal of beliefs and values is required to support action, a sort of 'flip,' a switch to seeing things the other way round, from the other end. For imagination, in Chambers' words;

“Outsiders need to envisage the distant but real and ramifying effects of their actions and non-actions, thinking through the causal chains which flow from them. The research of social scientists could help more here: it has rarely traced through such center-outwards linkages in the human detail of case studies, what Stephen Biggs has called 'slice' research.” Imagination is essential to recognize the causal connection. He proposes six approaches for reversing the learning process: sitting, asking, and learning; learning from the poorest; learning indigenous technical knowledge; joint research and development (R&D); learning by working; and simulation games. This is very important that even after decades, participatory approaches in social science research are still based on these principles. When Chambers spoke on the last first approach, he implied the importance of the Rapid Rural Appraisal method that included all the approaches mentioned above.

According to Chambers, the tension between two cultures, academic and practice, over time and timeliness, hinders action. Academic researchers favor longer appraisals, whereas practitioners need instant information to meet deadlines. Hence, Chambers sees action and participation as distant entities. That is the researcher who works in rural and does interdisciplinary research work by analyzing rural poverty and giving new opportunities to them as policy implications. Finally, the change will be brought by a professional other than the researcher, the practitioner. The participatory approach focuses on academia and practice but on different disciplines. Participatory approaches need to be combined with action to bring social change.

Participatory Paradigm and Action Research

The participatory paradigm, introduced as an alternative to the dominant paradigm of viewing economic growth as development, is termed success. Positive changes were evident in South America, Asia, and Africa nations. Many examples of participatory research approaches enabled marginalized people to gain a greater voice and control over their lives. Also, globally, participatory planning, budgeting, and accountability methods were being used in decentralized local governance (Pettit, 2010). Nevertheless, there were harsh criticisms that the findings of the participatory approaches, which in most cases were policy implications for development, were widely misused by organizations who assigned the researcher. These approaches have been criticized for their central focus on efficiency rather than the empowerment of

the people. When aid donors and development agencies located at the core determines the goals and targets for the communities and call for the participation of the community members in fulfilling these goals, it implies that the 'power' is still occupied at the core and not at the peripheries. Chambers sees that one of the major flaws of this approach was that the practitioners tend to see that action has to be carried out by the government or bureaucracies.

Within the participatory paradigm, new approaches were experimented with by scholars to find solutions to community problems. New approaches were used in health, agriculture, natural resource management, gender analysis, women's empowerment, youth participation, adult literacy, and other disciplines. Most of these efforts were action-oriented, finding solutions and implementing them toward social change. There is growing evidence of how action research processes can transform people and institutions—not through linear models of research-policy-practice but through emergent forms of action-reflection.

A simple definition of action research action means research aimed at contributing to social change. Jean Dreze points to the problem that only sometimes academia acknowledges the ability of people to change themselves and the potential value of research in assisting that process. Also, generally in action research, the researcher facilitates the process and collaborates with clients to create or actualize change. The researcher typically does not engage in change actions. However, Dreze, in his work *'On Research and Action,'* suggests that action research can work in two ways. One is that research can contribute to action, and the other is that action can help in research. The basic assumption of action research is that the aim is to facilitate human advancement and social change. Many researchers identify the policy implications as the solution to a social problem by viewing the government or developmental agency as the central agents of social change. Dreze critiques the habit of academics spiraling into never-ending conversations on theories and their criticisms, resulting in no action toward social change. He also complains about academics' complex language, which fails to communicate to the marginalized. Hence, action research has to function, generating knowledge about the problem along with solutions and implementing these solutions to solve the problems.

Thus, this indicates a new research approach in the participatory paradigm, with the researcher taking the role of the facilitator of social change. That is, action and participation together in the research process, Participatory Action Research (PAR). It could enable social change through the democratization of the process, similar to the idea of Dreze. In the PAR method, action is

incorporated into the research itself. Participatory action researchers maintain that widespread knowledge is a legitimate source of information about the world and must be used to promote solutions to social issues. The researcher's role is that of catalyst for social change and co-learner with the people (Selener, 1997). Quoting Hall, Selener finds the historical origin of the PAR method in the works of Marx, Engels, and Gramsci. However, the principal tenets of its present form evolved in the early 1960s with the works of Camilo Torres, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Paulo Freire. They all worked with the people of marginalized communities and created knowledge that resulted in social action. Selener (1997) explains that participatory action research combines three principal activities: research, education, and action. It is a research method in which people are actively involved in conducting a systematic assessment of a social phenomenon by identifying a specific problem to solve it. It is an educational process because researchers and participants together analyze and learn about the causes of and possible solutions to the problem addressed. It is an action-oriented method in that the findings are implemented as practical solutions. Dreze also argues that action-oriented research can be a catalyst for social change, and such steps can bridge the gap between academia and the community. Selener details the components of participatory action research as these. First, the problem originates in the community and is defined, analyzed, and solved by the community. Second, the goal of the research is the radical transformation and improvement in the lives of the community members. The primary beneficiaries of the study are the community members. Third, the participatory element of the research involves full and active cooperation of the community in the entire process. It involves a whole range of vulnerable groups of people. Fourth, PAR can create great awareness in the people of their own resources and can contribute to self-reliant development. Fifth, the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate analysis of social reality. Finally, the researcher is open to the community but an active participant, facilitator and learner in the process, including implementing solutions.

Evolution of C4D

Development communication involves applying various communication technology and techniques to solve social problems. The participatory models of C4D emerged along with the participatory models of development. As mentioned earlier, the scholars criticized the modernization theory of Lerner and the diffusion theory of Rogers. At the time, the dominant paradigm believed in technological determinism, and the research in Communication and development was to improve mass media access among the communities. Mass media access in a household was measured along with the household

facilities as a development indicator. It was also believed that information dissemination from top-to-bottom is the role of communication in development. Hence, research was conducted by the so-called 'developed nations' to find the best communication medium and improve media access among the 'underdeveloped.'

With the introduction of the participatory model, the role of communication in social change altered from information dissemination to more of a dialogic process. The point of departure shifted from the core to the periphery, the community itself. That the viewpoint of the local groups of the public is considered before the resources for development projects are allocated and distributed, and suggestions for changes in the policy are taken into consideration. As a result, the focus moves from a 'communicator' to a more 'receiver-centric' orientation, with the resultant emphasis on meaning sought and ascribed. Also, the perspective of mass media as the sole vehicle for bringing social change altered, that the mass media and interpersonal communication could work together for better results. Another change in the C4D perspective was that multiple mediums could work together to enhance change. Servaes cite an example regarding this with the interactivity capacity of both radio and the internet. He says, "*The internet and the radio are characterized by their interactivity. However, better access to information, education and knowledge would be the best stimulant for development, the Internet's primary development potential is as a point of access to the global knowledge infrastructure. The danger is that access to knowledge increasingly requires a telecom infrastructure that is inaccessible to the poor. While the benefits offered by the Internet are many, its dependence on a telecom infrastructure means that they are only available to a few. Radio is much more pervasive, accessible and affordable. Blending the two could be an ideal way of ensuring that the benefits accruing from the Internet have a wider reach.*"

The models of participatory communication are closely related to both the access and the human rights approaches to development. With the perspectives of Communication and development changed, the research methods used in the field also evolved. In the Participatory model, the researcher learns from the community, and active participation of the community members is needed. Paolo Mefalopulos, in the World Bank Document, says that meaningful participation cannot occur without communication. Unfortunately, too many development programs, while paying attention to participation, need to pay more attention to communication intended as the professional use of dialogic methods and tools to promote change. To be truly significant, participation must be based on applying simple two-way communication principles and practices. That is why communication is increasingly essential in facilitating

stakeholders' engagement in problem analysis and resolution. Hence, communication is not simply the vehicle of change, but rather role change to identifying the community problem, reaching a solution, implementing it, and even assessing the impact of the implementation. In the overall social change process, communication becomes the critical actor in the participatory model.

Accordingly, communication becomes a key agent in addressing development issues with the change from modernization to participation. Participation means communicating with the community. The development researchers acknowledged that providing television, radio, or the internet cannot bridge the communication gap. These can disseminate the information to the community. However, the community's critical development problem and social realities will still need to be addressed. Hence, it was recognized that participatory communication with the community could address these fundamental issues of 'underdevelopment.' Interpersonal and group communication had a significant role among marginalized groups, especially among indigenous people. The boundaries between academic disciplines diminished, and interdisciplinary research was conducted in the development field. Hence, researchers acknowledged the involvement of communication as the capacity of the community members to communicate with the development facilitators and the campaigns implemented. Scholars and UN organizations initiated many C4D initiatives to engage with the community and to find solutions to problems.

Participatory approaches have been widely used worldwide in giving voices to the marginalized. Community media initiatives, capacity-building campaigns, training and other ICT tools were introduced to the communities locally. Participatory research, monitoring, and evaluation methods were successfully used in C4D. Furthermore, they were widely acknowledged as adequate and appropriate. Research is to identify the problems of communities and implement ICT tools, monitoring the capacity of individuals and the tools implemented. Evaluation means assessing the change brought by these tools.

Considering the multiple roles of communication in different development areas, June Lennie and Jo Tacchi (2011) advocate for the triangulation of methods in research, monitoring, and evaluation in C4D. Quoting Bamberger, Greene, Hearn et al., Lennie and Tacchi point out the use of flexible, multi-disciplinary frameworks and methods that enable people to learn from each other, along with a culturally appropriate, mixed methods approach can contribute to the development research and impact assessment. Hearn et al., in their book *Action Research and New Media*, point out the characteristics of action research in C4D as a method of pluralism, as Lennie and Tacchi underpin the fact that different C4D approaches and programs need different

R, M&E methods. The fact that action research in participatory development means it starts with two-way communication with the community throughout the process.

Lennie and Tacchi trace the definitions of C4D over time from the modernization paradigm to the participatory paradigm. From the study of social change brought by communication research, theory, and technologies, C4D evolved as a ‘social process based on dialogue,’ as ‘about seeking change at different levels including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change.’ With the new understanding of C4D, the researchers applied new methods to understand better the community, their problems, the best suitable Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and the evaluation of ICTs implemented in the community. The relationship between the practical application of communication processes and technologies in achieving positive and measurable development outcomes is an emerging subject of research, discussion, and conjecture (Servaes, 2008). The power difference within the communities can also negatively affect the development process. The factors such as gender, age, social and economic capital could contribute to the power-knowledge nexus within the community. There was a need to address these issues within the communities. Mayoux and Chambers (2005) emphasized that the new impact assessment agenda for pro-poor development has to shift focus from ‘proving impact’ to ‘improving practice.’ They also outlined the fundamental principles of how improving practice, that is action research, can address the most vulnerable in the community. Since the role of communication in the participatory paradigm has increased from that of the modernization and dependency paradigm, understanding the problems to solve them requires a communication process with the community members. All this was aimed at bringing social change through a dialogic process, communication. Further, it merged different disciplines and methods in research. New action-oriented research approaches emerged in the participatory paradigm, Participatory action research (PAR) and Ethnographic action research in R, M&E in C4D.

Participatory Action Research in C4D

Since communication itself is participatory within the community and also with the C4D researcher, action-oriented research approaches emerged in the participatory paradigm, termed Participatory Action Research. The origin of this approach can be traced to the Rapid Rural Appraisal method. In the PAR approach, the researcher learns by doing. PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. It is a collective and self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake to understand and improve upon

the practices and situations in which they find themselves (Baum et al., 2006). PAR represents an epistemological framework, pedagogical approach, research methodology, and process for collaborative social action.

Dana E. Wright (2017) comments particularly on using PAR among marginalized communities. It employs participatory pedagogical approaches that engage people in analyzing their lived experiences and contexts to disrupt grand narratives that bolster systems of domination and structural disinvestments in marginalized people's institutions and communities.

Another feature of the PAR approach is that it considers the community the center of knowledge. Through participation with the community, the researcher aims to understand the issue and to solve the issue, improving by practice. The research process itself aims at the empowerment of the community. In the PAR approach, the data collection method is primarily qualitative. However, the mixed method is also adopted as Lennie, and Tacchi implied that the method of data collection and the research approach for R, M&E in C4D could be varied from one situation to another. The characteristic of the process is multiplicity and flexibility in nature.

The participatory approach is widely used in health and educational development programs in the rural community, and communication is a crucial agent in such programs. Hence, communication for development intrinsically links communication with participatory development.

'A case study of participatory action research in a public New England middle school: empowerment, constraints and challenges' conducted by Phillips, E. N. et al. (2010) describes implementing an inquiry-based PAR model into a formal urban middle school program intended to reduce drop-out rates. The researchers employed participant observation, interviews, and review of student work to explore the dynamics, challenges, and constraints confronted during the process. The intervention demonstrated the gap between practice and theory in a middle school environment marked by well-defined hierarchies and roles and high-stakes testing.

An action-research study investigating a spatially sensitive innovation process of place-based experiences in a rural area of Sweden was conducted by Bengtsson et al. (2022). They conducted intensive action-research interventions to unpack the complexity of developing place-based mediated experiences in the area. The study made an illustrative case of how interventions lead to more nuanced development processes of geo-media technologies. They implied that action research allows researchers to intervene in media innovations, and it identifies models for more nuanced place-based

development processes, including local spatial and sociocultural perspectives. These are two success stories of the PAR method toward development. The participatory paradigm becomes the dominant paradigm along with action research as a method to acquire social change; many such successful PAR case studies can be pointed out globally, especially in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) and Communicative ecologies

Ethnographic Action Research is a project development methodology designed specifically for media and ICT4D initiatives (Tacchi, 2015). It is a form of the PAR method. The ethnographic approach combined with action research builds upon notions of immersion, long-term engagement, and understanding local contexts holistically. Instead of focusing on individual ICTs and their 'impacts' on the community, an EAR approach look at the whole structure of communication and information in a people's way of life. The kinds of communication activities they carry out, the communications resources available to them - media content, technologies, and skills, how they understand these resources being used, the agencies or the people they are communicating and the reasons for it. This kind of comprehensive study on communication channels and information flow is the concept of communicative ecology. Once the researcher has built up this bigger picture, it is far easier to understand the impacts and possibilities of a particular medium and how communications fit into the other things that people are doing. EAR and communicative ecologies challenged both the technologic determinist and results-based management approaches by taking the position that if we start by considering how people communicate around particular themes or to accomplish specific tasks, we can start to appreciate which channels and flows are used and why, how this relates to other possible uses, and therefore where there are opportunities and barriers to an ICT4D initiative.

The ideas used to study communicative ecologies are media mixes or media repertoires; the selection of media for communication may differ according to the situation. Also, combined media may use. The second is the social organization of the media; the purpose and content of an e-mail of a teenager would differ from that of a businessman. Moreover, the last idea is social networks; the social networks among the marginalized sections are vital such as the tribal community and rural village community. The study can look into the possibility of media or ICT initiatives that can fit into the existing social network.

Further, Hearn et al. (2003) suggest that with the EAR method, the researcher can take up both broad and targeted research. In broad research, the researcher

does social mapping and contextualizing using various methods to build a rich understanding of the project and its context, including the communicative ecology. Through this research, the researcher can build relationships with workers, users, and stakeholders; and build up a picture of the main themes and issues that need to be understood. While in the targeted research, once the researcher has a more precise map of the social context and once the project is underway, both the researcher and the project will need to focus on more specific issues and groups of people.

As EAR is a form of PAR, the multi-method is used for data collection, which includes participant observation, focus group, discussions, and sometimes even questionnaire.

Kerala scenario: An approach to the voices to be heard

Kerala's development model is another case of a successful participatory model, in which Dreze and Sen attributed the success to the 'public action' character of the State. Compared to other Indian states, Kerala has the highest Human Development Index, literacy rate, and a better public health system. That is people's participation in designing the programs and in implementing them toward development, such as decentralization and people's planning campaign. Communities such as Kudumashree SHGs, and strong cooperative groups wrote the success stories in the State. The study titled, *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy: A case study of selected issues with reference to Kerala* conducted by the Centre for Development Studies brought to the fore that Kerala has been able to achieve a minimum of human development and welfare to its people despite a meager per capita income by international standards within two decades of its formation as a state in 1956. It then became known as the Kerala Model of Development, although the CDS study did not use such a term (Kannan, 2022). Sen and Dreze wrote on the Kerala way of development. Sen's human capability approach to development and its advocacy by the UNDP through the propagation of the Human Development Index gelled well with the development experience of Kerala. The state was lauded by academia as a place of holistic development through organized public participation. Many action research initiatives were taken up in the health and education sector. Discussing the communication and media statistics, 87 out of 100 individuals use the internet in the State (Manorama, 2022). Rapid ICT advances are being progressively adopted in Kerala for more effective state governance, including decentralized and participatory democracy (Manoj, P. K & James, Neeraja. 2017). Many government services are provided online through Akshaya Centres, the IT Mission project of the state for e-governance. Almost 20 community radio stations are functioning in the state, and many can be listened to online.

The participation and public action of the citizens were praised during the disaster, the 2018 floods, and the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the executive summary of Kerala: Post Disaster Needs Assessment Floods and Landslides - August 2018, with 669 boats, more than 4,000 fishermen voluntarily assisted the flood rescue operations and saved the lives of over 65,000 people. Subsequently, the role of NGOs and volunteers who actively took part in the flood relief operations was appreciated. World Health Organization representative to India attributed Kerala's success in effectively responding to Covid-19 to its experience and systematic investment in health systems strengthening along with measures such as surveillance, risk communication and community engagement, and broad social support.

In both crises, ICTs have been used to manage the situations. The Caravan reported that during the 2018 floods in the state, WhatsApp and Facebook were used by volunteers worldwide to connect those stranded with the rescuers and to manage and distribute the relief materials. A post-flood report of UNICEF commented that by employing community radios in the state, other media, and ICT tools, active and timely partnerships and proactive communication made possible, and it helped to keep the death toll and spread of disease to a minimum. This ensured a swift transition from the relief effort to recovery during the floods. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown enhanced ICT usage in Kerala. The school education continued with the help of the already established KITE VICTERS (Versatile ICT Enabled Resource for Students) channel. Online consultation with doctors was also initiated with ICT tools. There is an organized demand from the people for their needs which lead to public action, and participation is the main feature of the State. These all point toward the 'successful' decentralized, participatory Kerala development model.

However, the Kerala development model received criticism for its central tendency and neglecting the marginalized. Kurien (1995) termed this marginalization as the 'outliers' of development. A post-flood report (2018) published by the Government of Kerala on rebuilding the state commented that, during the rescue and relief operations, the extreme vulnerabilities of the elderly and differentially-abled persons became conspicuous. It was realized that the requirements of excluded groups must be prioritized across all aspects of disaster mitigation and resilience building. The state government report further says that considerations of class, caste, gender, and age, as well as unequal access to and control of resources, have particularly affected the socioeconomically disadvantaged in the state. It identifies the disadvantaged groups as the poor, particularly the multi-dimensionally poor; vulnerable women, including widows, household heads, and pregnant women; vulnerable

children, especially those traumatized by the loss of lives and destruction; Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; the elderly; fishing communities; people living with disability; and ‘invisible’ populations such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, inter-sex, and asexual persons; the destitute, the homeless poor, and those living on and off the street. Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) conducted by the government underlined the need to reach these marginalized people. The lack of ‘public action’ is evident among the marginalized. The socioeconomic living conditions of these marginalized communities and their lack of representation in the political process have been studied extensively by researchers and policymakers. The 2022-23 budget proposed a new method to measure absolute poverty in the state, which shows that the government is trying to identify the most vulnerable.

However, the C4D approaches, and ICT4D initiatives also have a centralized tendency. The ICT4D initiatives are mainly implemented in the education and health sector, but nothing particularly for the marginalized. In the education sector, problems faced by tribal students have come to the forefront. However, the debate and discussions still spiral around the language issue alone. One example of the lack of communication with the marginalized is that ‘public action’ and using ICTs for relief materials management were absent when the fisherfolk community faced the Okhi cyclone in 2017.

Another example is that when a landslide took the lives of 70 people in the Idukki district, it took more than 12 hours to communicate with the rescue and relief agencies. The difficulties faced by the tribals students during online education during Covid-19 times have been reported by media in the state. The issue of a gendered digital divide in the state was pointed out by Thakkar et al. (2023). Among the 20 community media operating in the state, only two work exclusively for marginalized communities; Radio Mattoli and Radio Monsoon. A scuffle and protests occurred between the Police and the fisherfolk when the community transmission of Covid-19 was first detected in a coastal village of Thiruvananthapuram. The lack of communication between the State and the community can be cited as the root cause of this problem. UN Human Development Report (2017) calls for far greater attention to empowering the most marginalized in society and recognizes the importance of giving them a greater voice in decision-making processes.

Sen implies that if development analysis is relevant within the countries, the presence of such intergroup contrasts within the countries is an essential aspect of understanding of development and underdevelopment. A core and periphery exist within a country, state, or even a village. Change toward development has to address this most vulnerable group. Considering Chamber’s idea to Put the Last First, he focused on addressing the issue of the

most vulnerable in the community. There is a need for a micro-level approach among these communities to identify their problems and needs and finally solve them. For successful project implementation, what is needed is not just the participation of the local population but the marginalized sections of the local population. Participation of the local means horizontal communication with the community and researchers; connect with them.

Community participation and action, as Sen suggested, is essential for a dialogic process with the marginalized to bring change. The concept of Chambers to 'Put the Last First' could be adopted here; however, his approach to evaluating social change is reverted. That is, PAR methods are proven successful globally with the method selected according to the community and the problem to be solved. Further, there should be flexibility in the research, monitoring, and evaluation of C4D. The PAR approach is rigorous and based on various approaches, methodologies, and methods selected according to each initiative and its context. Learning along with the community and facilitating the change according to the situation and emerging results. As Tacchi suggested, for an ICT4D initiative to be implemented, the researcher must know the community well. Hence an EAR approach studies the whole about what channels the community is using and the purposes of using. More holistic knowledge of the media and communication system and their problems can be identified by the researcher, knowing the communicative ecology of the community. Also, the best technology which can adapt to the existing social structure can be suggested through the EAR approach.

Conclusion

C4D and ICT4 D initiatives have evolved globally. Furthermore, there are a handful of success stories worldwide about the PAR, and EAR approaches to C4D bringing social change. However, Kerala, being represented as a land of holistic development, Kerala still has its development outlier communities. The voices of these marginalized communities should be heard. With the detailed concepts of Putting the Last First of Robert Chambers, action research, and ethnography, this paper suggests that micro-level community-based PAR and EAR approaches can bring social change. Flexible approaches that learn along with the community and evolve through the progress of the study are needed among marginalized communities.

Each community has to be studied separately for its developmental problems. This may need different approaches and methods throughout the study and can bring social change. The researcher monitors the outcome of the project implemented and evaluates it, not measuring it. The method can be re-adjust again if needed and can bring social change.

References

- Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 60(10), 854–857. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662>
- Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 60(10), 854–857. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662>
- Bengtsson, L., Braunerhielm, L., Gibson, L., Hoppstadius, F. & Kingsepp, E. (2022). Digital media innovations through participatory action research: Interventions for digital place-based experiences. *Nordicom Review*, 43(2) 134-151. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2022-0009>
- Chambers R. (1984). *Rural development : putting the last first*. Longman.
- Chathukulam, J., & Tharamangalam, J. (2021). The Kerala model in the time of COVID19: Rethinking state, society and democracy. *World development*, 137, 105207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105207>
- Drèze Jean. (2019). *Sense and solidarity : jholawala economics for everyone*. Oxford University Press.
- Dreze, J. (2002). On Research and Action. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(9), 817–819. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411799>
- Freire, P. (1983). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* <https://www.undp.org/publications/human-development-report-2016>
- Jacob, V. Jikku. (2022). 87 out of 100 Keralites have internet connection; only Delhi ahead of state. *Malayala Manorama*. <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2022/07/11/internet-connection-kerala-delhi-trai.html>
- Jaleel, K. T. (2016). *Marginalisation, Poverty and Decentralisation. Marginalisation and Deprivation: Stuides on Multiple Vulnerabilities* (Ed. Balan, P. P et al.) Thiruvananthapuram: KILA
- K. M. Muhammed Sihas & Lekshmi V. Nair, 2022. "Impact of COVID-19 on the Education of Adivasi Communities in Kerala," *Indian Journal of Human Development*, vol. 16(1), pages 186-193, April.
- Kannan, K. P. (2022). *Kerala ‘Model’ of Development Revisited A Sixty-Year Assessment of Successes and Failures*. Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies

- Kannan, K.P. & Pillai N, Vijayamohan. (2005). Public Action as Participatory Development: The Kerala Experience Re-Interpreted. 10.4135/9788132102144.n6.
- Kerala: Post Disaster Needs Assessment Floods and Landslides - August 2018 Executive Summary. (2018). Government of Kerala
- Konnikkara, A. (2018). How social media was vital to rescue efforts during the Kerala floods. *The Caravan*. <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/how-social-media-was-vital-to-rescue-efforts-during-the-kerala-floods>
- Lennie, J., & Tacchi, J. Tensions, Challenges and Issues in Evaluating Communication for Development. *Nordicom Review*, 36(s1), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/NOR-2015-0027>
- Lennie, June & Tacchi, Jo. (2007). The value of participatory action research for managing a collaborative ICT impact assessment project in Nepal.
- Lennie, June & Tacchi, Jo. (2011). Researching, Monitoring and Evaluating Communication for Development: Trends, Challenges and Approaches. Report on a literature review and consultations with Expert Reference Group and UN Focal Points on C4D.
- Lennie, June and Skuse, Andrew and Koirala, Bikash (2009) Developing a participatory impact assessment approach and action research culture within a communication for social change organisation in Nepal.
- Mefalopulos, Paolo. (2008). *Development Communication Sourcebook : Broadening the Boundaries of Communication*. Washington, DC : World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/6439> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.
- P K, Manoj & James, Neeraja. (2017). E-Governance Initiatives in Kerala: An Empirical Investigation of their Benefits and Sustainability. 1. 264-275.
- Parfitt, T. (2004). The Ambiguity of Participation: A Qualified Defence of Participatory Development. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(3), 537–556. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993824>
- Pettit, Jethro. (2010). Learning to do action research for social change. *International Journal of Communication*. 4. 820-827.
- Phillips, E. N., Berg, M. J., Rodriguez, C., & Morgan, D. (2010). A case study of participatory action research in a public new England middle school: empowerment, constraints and challenges. *American journal of community psychology*, 46(1-2), 179–194. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9336-7>
- Responding to Covid-19 learnings from Kerala. (2020). World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/india/news/feature-stories/detail/responding-to-covid-19--learnings-from-kerala>

- Rodriguez, Martinez & Aranda, Marcelino et al. (2020). Contradictions of the development model of the state of Kerala, India: the tribal population. *Revista Espacios*
- Selener D. (1997). *Participatory action research and social change*. Cornell University.
- Selener, D. (1997). *Participatory action research and social change*.
- Servaes, Jan. (2008). *Communication for Development and Social Change*. 10.4135/9788132108474.
- Tacchi, Jo. (2015). *Ethnographic action research: Media, information and communicative ecologies for development initiatives*.
- Thakkar, Shriya & Miller, B. & Palackal, Antony & Shrum, Wesley. (2023). *Internet and Mobile Use: Exploring the Gendered Digital Divide in Kerala*. *Journal of Social Sciences*. 36. 35-56.
- Ulahannan, Sabu & N Srinivas, Prashanth & Sreekumar, Sreenidhi & Jament, Johnson & Mohan, Malu. (2022). *COVID-19 and Multiple Inequalities: The Case of a Coastal Community in Kerala*. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 57. 24 - 27.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Building Back Better: Kerala Addressing Post-Disaster Recovery Needs*. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/12211/file>
- Wright, Dana E. (2021). *Participatory Action Research*. obo in *Communication*. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199756841-0257