

Worker participation in a respiratory health survey

In this article, members of the Health Information Centre (HIC) present a definition of participatory research, which is demonstrated with one of the projects they were involved in.



Definition

Participatory research can be defined as a method of social investigation, as well as an educational act and a means of taking action. This definition of participatory research was used by contributors to the International Forum on Participatory Research held in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia in 1980.

The first step

The first step towards doing participatory research, is for the people involved to identify their problem and how they want to tackle the problem.

The project that we were involved in began in this way.

A union had identified a particular problem facing its workers and asked the Health Information Centre to assist in investigating this problem. Receiving this request meant that we had already crossed the first bridge. We were working for a democratic organisation with its own structures which enabled those experiencing the problem to express their needs.

The Health Information Centre conducted a respiratory health survey for this union. What makes our research easier is that it is only done on request. This means that the need has already been identified by a union - by the people that we are doing the research for.

The question the union wanted investigated was whether exposure to a certain dust in their workplace could cause respiratory disease.

Accountability

Carrying out this research was only the first step. An equally important part of our research task was to make the results accessible to the people we conducted the research with. Nothing was done without informing the entire workforce and getting their go-ahead.

This involved meeting with all the workers in the factory. It meant explaining to them what it is we were doing and why. It meant getting up at 4 am to be at the factory by 5 to meet the 6 am shift before they went to work so that we could discuss the study with them. It meant going to the hostel in which the workers lived on the weekend to meet with them to explain the study. It meant explaining what a lung function machine is and showing them how it worked. We demonstrated skin prick testing and how to use a bronchodilator.

Having explained and demonstrated the methods of and the reasons for the investigation, the workers agreed with the chosen method of study.

Discussing the protocol

We then went with the workers to a meeting with management to discuss the protocol.

A plan had to be drawn up to test workers with minimum disruption to production. We were given the task, together with the union, of preparing this plan to present to management.

We had 300 workers to test before they began work.



300 workers were tested before they began work

Together we drew up a plan which involved asking workers to come to work an hour early. For the morning shift this meant asking workers to get up at 4 am. Again a meeting of the entire workforce was needed to find out if the workers would agree to this. They did, and management agreed to pay workers for the time that they came early to work. Also it was decided that only some workers would come early and others would start an hour late.

Both parties, management and labour, were happy with the method of and reasons for our research. So when workers were taken out of the factory and production decreased for a while, no-one complained. Everyone was informed about the process of testing.

The survey

We conducted a respiratory health survey investigating the effects of dust on workers' health.

The study consisted of a respiratory questionnaire, lung function studies at the beginning and end of the working week, as well as response to a bronchodilator and skin prick testing to determine the atopic status of the working population.

Report-back to workers

The research was conducted and analysed, and the results presented to the union and management in writing. In addition, a workers' report-back was organised. The entire workforce came to a 6 am meeting where, through translation, we explained the results of the study.

This process was time consuming and often frustrating, but this was outweighed by the benefits. It was very enlightening to see a successful democratic process in operation. It was a privilege for researchers from a service group to have the trust of a workforce and to be able to participate in their structures.

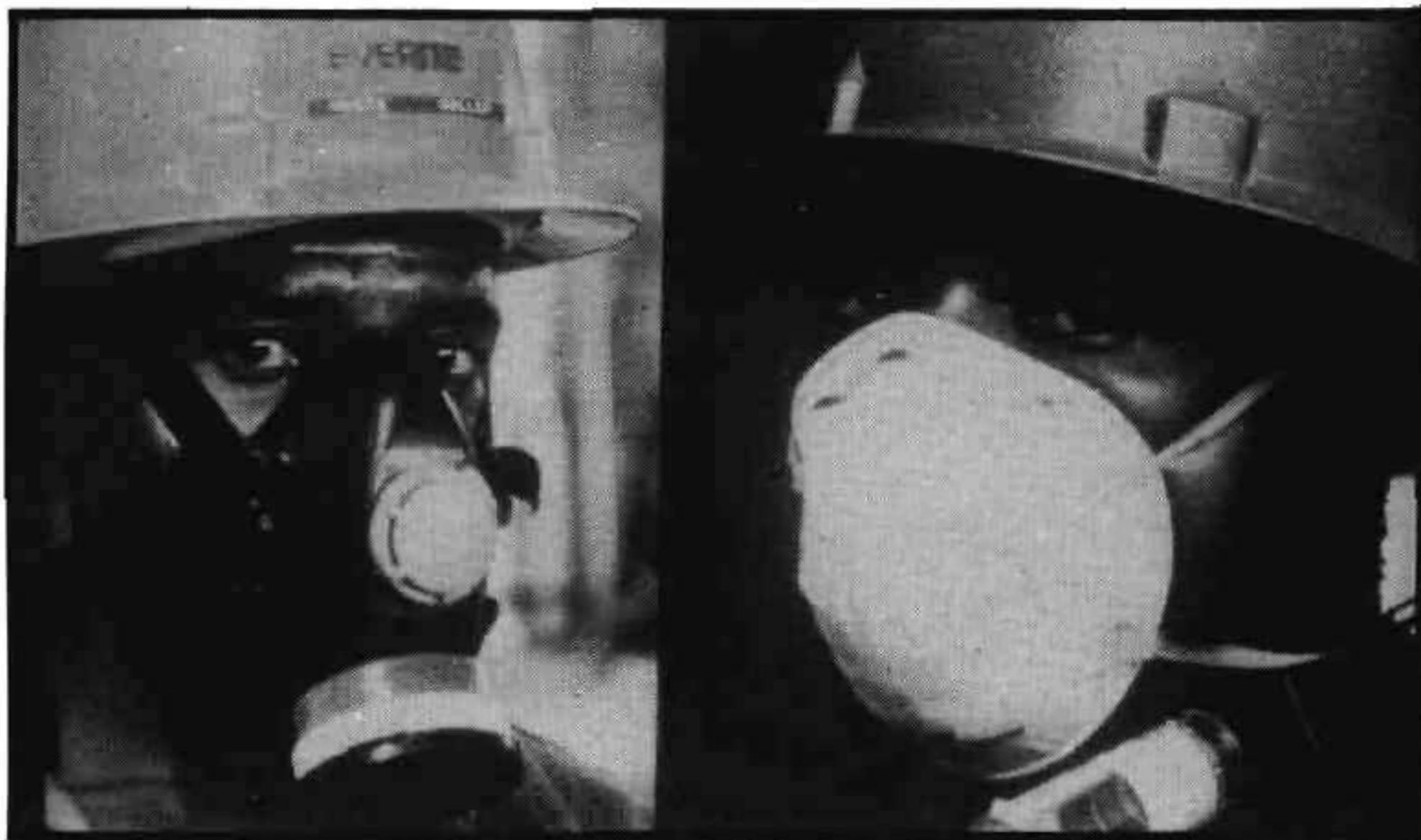
Was the survey an example of participatory research?

Personally fulfilling though this might have been, did we achieve any of the criteria of participatory research mentioned at the beginning of this article?

Firstly, this was a method of social investigation whereby an answer was obtained, so we did achieve the first criterion. However, this in itself is not unique to participatory research.

Was it an educational act? Clearly it was. Workers learnt about dust and lungs and about testing both. They learnt that medical research is not foreign and incomprehensible, but rather something that they can easily participate in and contribute to. They learnt about their own power in taking control of the study, directing it, and stopping procedures that did not suit them, demanding that they be rearranged.

Did this research project result in any action? At wage negotiations, workers put forward demands for improved working conditions. This is a slow process. But after only two years, better methods of handling the raw material, with less dust, have been introduced into every factory organised by this union - not just the factory where the study was conducted. Health and safety are firmly on the union agenda. Together with the union we produced education booklets on the hazards in this industry. Therefore our research fulfilled the last criterion: Action has been taken.



Workers learnt about dust and lungs and about testing both

Are there limits to participatory research?

It is important to remain critical of the process of research.

There were certainly times where we and the union could have been more careful to involve workers. In the analysis stage we were using computers to analyse the data. During this time we had little contact with the workers.

We need to ask ourselves if there are not other ways of handling the information and if the adaptation of conventional research to fit into the participatory model is the most we can do. There are other researchers who have tried to radicalise research even further and to debunk theories that conventional researchers hold to be gold standards.

What makes for successful participatory research?

We were working with a democratic organisation within which workers have control.

No other method of research would have been acceptable to them: It is possible that the workers led the study in such a way as to show us just how far the participatory research model could be pushed.

Certainly we played our role and contributed to this significantly, but it was not all our impetus.

The degree to which action was taken by the union as a result of this research project had much more to do with their structures and methods of relating to management, than to the research project itself. Nonetheless, without our backup, they would not have been in a position to achieve this.

Democratic organisation



Research cannot be done in a participatory manner without the framework of democratic organisation

What does this mean for other researchers trying to do research in a participatory manner? We doubt that it can be done without the framework of democratic organisation. A research project can work towards building up such organisation. Thus the two can complement each other. But the starting point is the pre-existing germ of organisation. This is a pre-condition for the success of participatory research.