

## **Developing the PORP Programme in the ILO.**

– *Md. Anisur Rahman*

*“Thank you for telling us that we are not poor!”*

– (a village blacksmith in ORAP movement in Zimbabwe)

This paper is a personal account of development of the programme on “Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor” (PORP) started in September 1977 at the International Labour Office (ILO) and liquidated end of 1990. It complements the more substantial review by the author in the Handbook of Action Research (Reason & Bradbury 2007) of the particular trend in Participatory Action Research including PORP in which the author has participated.<sup>i</sup>

a “revolutionary” or a “reformist”?

When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on 15 August 1975 I was on a summer research assignment at the United Nations Asian Development Institute in Bangkok, and was ‘exiled’ abroad because of an warrant of arrest against me for my association with an European journalist alleged to have been assisting a radical political party in Bangladesh to promote a ‘revolution’. I was offered the job of Deputy Director of the Research Division of the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which I turned down for ideological disagreement with UNCTAD’s policy that I assessed to be against my passion for self-reliant development of countries of the south. UNCTAD then generously gave me a one-year research grant to help me meet my immediate need for survival with my family. Thereafter I joined for a year the Rural Development Group of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex while continuing to look for a longer term opening abroad.

Early in 1977 the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) of the British government called the rural development group of IDS at its London office for a consultation on the ODA’s programme of assistance to developing countries. The Secretary, ODA, was in chair. I was presented

first to the Chair by the leader of our group as a person having “imaginative ideas”. I started talking of supporting programmes in developing countries that would promote organisations of the disadvantaged people for collective self-development and social rights action. I could not proceed very far. The Chair stopped me abruptly, saying that I was talking of ‘revolution’. I claimed that I was not, and that ‘revolutionaries’ in my country called me a ‘reformist’. This did not have any effect on the Chair, and I had no opportunity to talk further for the rest of the discussion.

This happened even after the Rural Workers’ Organisation Convention 141 and Recommendation 149 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) had been passed in its tripartite Conference in 1975 calling for promotion of “strong and independent organisations of rural workers...as an effective means of ensuring [their] participation ...in economic and social development and in the benefits resulting therefrom”. Obviously, the ILO could not be labeled as a ‘revolutionary’ organisation in political-theoretic term. But a distinction could clearly be made between the ‘right wing’ which the ODA Secretary obviously represented, and the more ‘liberal’/‘progressive’ quarters in the ILO who were responsible for passage of the above two instruments.

With my writings on and some experience with self-reliant grassroots development I was invited by the ILO – at the initiative of Dharam Ghai the then Chief of the Rural Employment Policies Branch (EMP/RU) of the ILO in the “progressive” camp of the organisation, to join the Office to develop a programme on “Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor” (PORP) in his branch. As the then chief of the Employment Department (EMPLOI) Mrs. Beguin wrote to me while formally inviting me to join the Office, I was to “put the ILO on the map” in this field. Attracted by this challenging invitation I joined the ILO, despite strong warning by letter from my very good friend Marc Nerfin, Head of the Nyon-based International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA), that I would be very frustrated working in the ILO, a big UN bureaucracy. Bureaucracy apart, I had not been warned of the tough resistance I was to face within the Office to accomplish my assigned mission. And having come from a purely academic background I was a total novice in playing the game that I was called upon to play.

the first challenge – from conventional researchers

I joined the ILO in September 1977, initially supported by piecemeal funding outside the Regular Budget. Soon thereafter Dharam Ghai asked me to put down my initial thoughts toward developing PORP. I did so, proposing in a preliminary way to work to (a) promote participatory research with and by the rural poor themselves, and (b) launch field projects with educated-activists to go to the rural poor to promote their self-reliant organizations and collective economic and social action. Dharam Ghai looked excited by the ideas, and put them for discussion in a seminar of EMP/RU early in 1978. And then the first resistance – from conventional academic researchers in EMP/RU – came.

I had felt that they had already ganged up against me, and wanted to lift me up and throw me out of the window if they could. “Who are these persons who will go to the rural poor and mess up their lives?” “The ILO should not engage in any adventurism and should only walk on well-charted paths.” These are the kind of arrows that were shot at me. Among my responses to them, I said: “My students can very well do the walking on well-charted paths; I want precisely to try the uncharted”. And there was, indeed, one of my ex-students there expressing, fully in his rights, his deep skepticism about my ideas.

After the seminar I went to Dharam Ghai’s room and found him sitting alone, very dejected. He said, “Anis I am very sorry – I never expected there would be such vehement resistance to your ideas.” I replied, “ Dharam, if you want me to build this programme you should not make me accountable to these colleagues – they are not my audience.” Dharam said, “ I realize, and you move on – you will have my full support”. What a courageous visionary Dharam Ghai was, to promise me support against almost the full team of his other colleagues in the Branch!

And I moved on to develop PORP, with the support of Mrs. Zubeida Ahmed, my immediate superior in the Branch and the Branch chief only, in uncomfortable co-existence with conventional researchers in the Branch.

the second challenge – to win the trade unionists

But the second challenge that came from within the Office, after a while, was much tougher.

In the beginning PORP sought to promote understanding, through research on concrete experiences, some of the basic issues on the question of participation of the rural poor in development. The subject was obviously multidisciplinary. Scattered literature on the subject existed, but this did not constitute a coherent base either to guide field action or to build upon by way of further research. The subject being intimately human, conventional research methodology that seeks to collect data through detached observation and questioning was inappropriate to understand it. In particular, the perceptions and understanding of the people whose participation was in question were obviously crucially important in developing this understanding. Furthermore, these perceptions and understandings were obviously not static but subject to dynamic processes of interaction between people's reflections and their life's initiatives and struggles. Considering all these, I considered, initially, the *dialogical* method of inquiry in which the people would be drawn into critical reflection of their own, to be the most appropriate method of research without precluding, however, the role of conventional research methodology to collect other kind of data. Conventional researchers were not as a rule oriented to dialogical research which required a different human relations approach to the inquiry than was customary in development research. Hence I started looking for researchers who would themselves be innovators in research methodology.

Progress was initially slow, but very enriching. I was myself already involved in a research partnership between four professionals – G.V. de Silva and Ponna Wignaraja from Sri Lanka and Niranjana Mehta from India besides myself – with the “Bhoomi Sena” (“Land Army”) movement in Maharashtra province in India in which the cadres and external activists working with the movement had joined us as research partners. This classic work (de Silva 1979) was completed after I joined the ILO, and it gave a sharp and coherent articulation both of the “basic principles of participation” (as ascribed by Fals Borda 2001) and also of what gradually came to be known as “participatory research”, whose conceptual articulation first came in clearest terms from the Toronto-based International Center for Adult Education (Hall 1997). In its initial search for innovative researchers PORP was also able to stimulate a social anthropologist in Chile – Gonzalo Falabella - to actually become, temporarily, a ‘rural poor’. In researching on and with the *torrantes*, a community of extremely poor rural workers who moved in a trail across the country in search for work, Gonzallo himself became a *torrante*, fully living their life for the period of research *as a research methodology*, sharing their dire poverty, moving along their trail in

search of seasonal farm work that often kept him starving, and seeking to understand their life and problems in intense dialogues with them as he moved with them in their trail (Falabella 1982). For radical revolutionaries who claim to have been “declassed” but only mentally, here was an example of a researcher getting truly “declassed”, even temporarily, to understand the depth of the problems of the working class which cannot be understood fully without living them.

With its own experience in participatory research (PR) with Bhoomi Sena PORP zeroed in on PR as its research methodology. At one level PORP aimed to contribute to the theoretical as well as practical articulation of participatory research. At another level it wished to integrate PR with collective initiatives of rural workers through organising, the two together to promote *collective praxis* – i.e. cycles of reflection and action - of rural workers, a process that later was conceptualized as “Participatory Action Research” (PAR). While trying to develop its programme with this perspective PORP faced its second challenge within the Office for which I had not been prepared.

Reports of PORP’s activities and thinking were going up to the Deputy Director-general in charge of the Office’s technical work (DGA/TEC) Mr. Jain. At one point Mr. Jain, while expressing appreciation of my conception and initiatives, wrote in a comment on the file: “I hope EDUC (the Rural Workers’ Education unit in the Office) is in the picture.” Soon thereafter he told me in a meeting on my work that I had with him, that while he was appreciative of the potential of my thinking and work, he would not be able to support me if I could not get EDUC’s support. This actually meant the support of the Workers’ Group (Trade Unions) in the ILO with which EDUC was naturally in close liaison. I had not thought of this before, and nobody had briefed me about this.

In some of the internal Office files I had observed the general ‘hostility’ EDUC had toward EMP/RU, expressed in words like: “The rural workers are sick and tired by outside researchers going to them to research upon them”. With such statement I was myself in full sympathy. But PORP was nevertheless seeking to send outside researchers for research *with* the people as well as to promote research *by* the people, and would EDUC agree? But as Mr. Jain had clearly warned me, without EDUC’s support PORP as I had conceived it had no chance of having a home in the ILO. So I had to see the chief of EDUC, Dennis Hodsdon. I inquired about him, and was warned that

he was a very tough trade unionist. I prepared myself mentally to have to look for a job again for my 'basic needs' so soon after joining the ILO.

I phoned Mr. Hodsdon and invited him to lunch with me. He came, and listened to my conception of PORP, in which I stressed on participatory research with rural workers, development of their self-chosen self-reliant organizations for social rights as well as developmental action as per ILO Convention 141 and Recommendation 149 (in the drafting of both of which Hodsdon had a major hand), and sending "catalysts"/"animators" to stimulate and assist rural workers form and develop their organisations. Hodsdon listened attentively, and then said, "I agree with participatory research and with your ideas of self-reliant organisations of rural workers. But only recognized trade unions will go to them to promote and assist such activities."

I had prepared myself mentally to leave the ILO if Hodsdon, and hence the Office, rejected me. So I also could afford to be blunt and tough. And I had done my home work. I gave him two pieces of meat to chew:

(1) "Mr. Hodsdon, you are a seasoned trade unionist, and you know more than I do the history of the trade union movement. You know that many trade unions in many countries have emerged after an initial period of mobilizing work with workers by non-trade unionists – e.g. lawyers, educationists, social activists etc. Do you now wish to block this path of extending and enriching the trade union movement?" Mr. Hodsdon was silent. I went on to my second point, to show him myself fully:

(2) Mr. Hodsdon, I come from Bangladesh, and I know the trade unions there. They are all created by or are linked with political parties, and are as filthy as the political parties themselves. I would not touch any of them."

Mr. Hodsdon remained silent for some more while. Then he said slowly:

*"Bangladesh is not the only country where this is true."*

I saw that behind his toughness Hodsdon was an honest man. And I knew that I had a chance. I did not rub it in any further, shook hands with him saying "see you again", and we parted.

After this I went to India for the last phase of our participatory research with the Bhoomi Sena movement, and learnt that Bhoomi Sena had created and

registered an Agricultural Workers' union in their area, after non-union movement for about ten years to create political space. Upon my return to the Office I put this in my Mission Report and took it to Mr. Hodsdon, and giving it to him, said "Here is my present to you!"

Dennis Hodsdon was very, very pleased, and said "Well done!"

Some months after this the Programme and Budget Hearing of the Office for 1980-81 took place under the chairmanship of DGA/TEC. EMP/RU had submitted for this hearing a programme-proposal prepared by me for inclusion of PORP in the regular budget, and on the acceptance of this proposal rested the question of PORP – and myself – continuing in the ILO. When this proposal came up for consideration Mr. Jain looked straight at Mr. Hodsdon and asked, "What does EDUC think of this proposal?" Mr. Hodsdon replied,

*"Normally EDUC would have fought such a proposal for organising work with rural workers outside of EDUC. But since Anisur Rahman is handling it, EDUC gives it full support."*

PORP, and I, got a firm seat in the ILO.

#### PORP sails

Soon thereafter Hodsdon and I joined hands to co-author a major paper on "Rural Workers' Organisations and Participation" for presentation at a meeting of the ILO's tripartite Advisory Committee on Rural Development. The paper discussed the principles of participation of rural workers in development, participatory research by and with rural workers and organising work with them without reference to which quarter should assist them in organising. There was pressure even in my presence from important quarters in the Workers' Group for putting down the exclusive right of existing trade unions to do the organising work, but Hodsdon handled them, telling them that he knew what I was doing. Thanks to Hodsdon's advocacy on my behalf the paper got the endorsement of the Workers' Relations (REL/TRAV) department in the Office, as it had to before it could be presented to the Advisory Committee. Many considered it to be an extraordinary sight that EDUC and EMP/RU, the relation between them having never been known to be easy, were jointly presenting a paper on participation and organisation of rural workers to the Advisory Committee.

In PORP's own work I was able progressively to connect with some very committed intellectual-activists initially in India and the Philippines, through whom I was able to initiate a set of innovative experiments in participatory research that evolved their own methodologies in consultation with the concerned grass-roots partners as PR should. At the same time I joined my colleagues in the Bhoomi Sena study in experimenting in Sri Lanka under a "change agents programme" launched with UNDP support (in 1978), with cadre "sensitisation" as opposed to the conventional notion of "training", "of would-be "animators" to promote grass-roots participation of disadvantaged people. With the notion that field workers cannot be "trained" to respond creatively to dynamic grass-root situations but can be made sensitive to their challenge of promoting self-reliant people's processes, we were able to evolve a conception and methodology of sensitising would-be animators by way of stimulating their own collective reflection on the challenge of their call rather than develop class-room type "training modules" and lectures. (Rahman 2007)

#### beating the "white elephants" in the field

Meanwhile I participated with Dharam Ghai in a five-week mission to Nepal on behalf of the International fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to help it identify projects for support. The mission leader of our six member team was a senior Agricultural Economist from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington. While the mission leader wanted to support big-budget projects of a conventional nature ("white elephants" as often referred to), Sartaz Aziz the then Deputy Secretary-General of IFDA told Dharam and me aside that he was counting for the "real thing" from the two of us. I had heard of the innovative Small Farmer Development Programme (SFDP) that FAO had initiated in Nepal in 1975 to credit to small farmers against group liability without any material collateral and had done my homework reading up materials on the SFDP. Dharam Ghai and myself visited the SFDP programme in Nepal to satisfy ourselves from a first hand look that it was working well. The rest of the Mission with the Mission leader visited some "white elephants" which the government showed them eager to get IFAD support for them. We told our Mission leader that we wished to recommend the SFDP programme in Nepal for IFAD support, and he was visibly unhappy.

In the final de-briefing with the Agricultural Minister of the Government of Nepal our Mission leader said he would recommend five of the large projects he and his other colleagues had seen for IFAD's consideration for support, and the minister was naturally very happy. Then our Mission leader said, "Your Excellency, we have two gentlemen in our mission from the ILO which as you know wants to help the rural poor. While I think special support to poor-oriented projects is not necessary if we can promote agricultural development, Mr. Rahman will say something on this matter."

I saw that I had to play on a ground that had already been prepared against us. I said:

"Your Excellency, can I talk to you as a Bangladeshi to a Nepalese?"

"Yes, yes, of course".

"Your Excellency, we in Bangladesh also dress our shop as you do to attract a lot of donor funding, and I am sure deep down in your heart this hurts your patriotism just as it hurts ours. But we have seen a project in your country, the SFDP, with which *you can be a donor* – a donor of ideas and experience for development that you can teach to other developing countries. And we have decided ourselves to take this Nepalese experience to other countries."

The Minister's face shone like the stars and he said,

"Thank you, thank you so much Mr. Rahman! What you have just said will give so much encouragement to the dedicated officials who are working in this project."

"Your Excellency, can we recommend expansion of this programme with IFAD's assistance?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

SFDP got entry into our Mission's list as project no. 6 for consideration of IFAD's support. And IFAD selected only this one for its support.

the third challenge – publishing the people's point of view

As PORP's work started becoming known the Society for International Development's journal *Development: Seeds of Change, Village through Global Order* invited me to take one of its issues as a guest editor and put short versions of some of our research findings in it (Rahman 1981). Notwithstanding such recognition outside of PORP's research I faced stiff resistance from EDITRAD, the department responsible for approving ILO's research for publication from the point of view of Office publication policy, in publishing a set of full case studies – my third major struggle in the ILO.

The manuscript – “Grassroots Participation and Self-reliance: experiences of South and South East Asia” – was submitted early 1982 to EDITRAD, through the Branch and the Department. It came back from EDITRAD with a “no”, saying that it was biased and therefore did not satisfy the standard of objectivity in ILO's publications as, having followed the method of “participatory research”, it presented only the “people's point of view” while other points of view existed.

I fought back, and wrote:

*“What I have tried to do in a very small way is to try correct the great bias that exists in all ILO literature where the people's point of view is never represented. I do not accept the claim of objectivity in ILO's publications which are all biased – the question is whose side the ILO wishes to represent.”*

My reply went back up the Branch and Department stairs to EDITRAD, ticked by the respective chiefs without comments as if to witness the fight from the sidelines as sympathetic but non-participant parties, and understandably so – how could the Branch and Department also join in such devastating attack on the objectivity of all ILO publications? And, of course, EDITRAD did not budge. And the Office rules of business ordained that in case of dispute between EDITRAD and the responsible technical department for a proposed publication the case would go to DGA/TEC who would appoint a Commission to examine the issue.

Next day Mr. Jain called me. Going to his office I saw the manuscript on his desk. He said, “Anis, I want to see this published. But I have to handle the bureaucracy. So I shall appoint a one-man Commission. And I shall talk to the fellow.”

The Commission that Mr. Jain appointed was in the person of Mr. Ameer Ali, the then chief of the Training Department, a senior highly respected very capable official. The next day Mr. Ameer Ali was at my door:

“Mr. Rahman?”

“Yes?”

“I am Ameer Ali, and your manuscript is with me. Mr. Rahman, I did not know that you existed in this Office. You do not worry – I shall handle the matter.”

The recommendation of the Commission was the following. It said, first, that the research method followed in the book being participatory research whereby viewpoints of the people, meaning here rural workers, had been represented, the ILO, an organisation to promote the interests of workers, cannot but give leadership in this kind of research and cannot abdicate from this responsibility. However, as the question of objectivity has been raised, the Commission suggests that the editor add a statement in the preface, to the effect that in presenting this set of studies the ILO is aware that other points of view exist, and is not taking any side, but that the ILO considers it very important that the people’s points of view be known. What a brilliant resolution of the dispute!

Mr. Jain called me in his office again. The Commission’s report was on his desk. He showed it to me, and said, “Anis, can you live with this?” I said, “This is very fair, and I have absolutely no problem with it. I shall add a statement along these lines in my preface.”

Thanks to the extraordinary support I got from Mr. Jain and Mr. Ameer Ali’s brilliant handling of EDITRAD’s resistance to its publication, the book was published (Rahman 1983) to announce the ILO in the frontline of Participatory Research. And it got the following review in the *World Development* :

“A collection of papers from the ILO’s World Employment Programme, this is beyond doubt the finest assembly of case studies of local organizations in development that has been published in years.” (*World Development* (14.5). Book Notes section, p 675).

a participatory research report that PORP could not own

Mention should also be made, however, of a participatory research whose results PORP did not even submit to the Office to consider its publication under the banner of the ILO. PORP invited five forest-based poor people's movements and organizations in different parts of India to interact with each other, bilaterally through mutual visits as well as all together in seminars and workshops, for joint inquiry and articulation on the subject of "forest, ecology and the oppressed". The final written articulation of their position was, not unexpectedly, too 'radical', rejecting existing notions of masters of societies considering forests as a 'resource' for development rather than a companion of human life to live organically together with, and attacking the social power structures explicitly. Notwithstanding my total personal sympathy with this position I had to decide, with the agreement of EMP/RU and EMPLOI, to release this report for independent publication (Dasgupta 1986) not even making an acknowledgement to PORP/ILO for having initiated and assisted what I regard as one of the most valuable participatory research processes and of a significant cross-people's-movement scale that PORP had initiated.

#### technical cooperation among catalytic agents

Meanwhile Jack Martin had taken over as chief of EMPLOI. While his predecessor Mrs. Beguin was cautiously appreciative of PORP's efforts through her minutes I hardly ever saw her, but Jack Martin's door was always open to his colleagues and he told me one day, "Anis I wanted to tell you that your work is very important to me personally." That was, of course, a big boost to my spirits.

The "change agents programme" in Sri Lanka in whose launching I had participated was making impressive progress in promoting self-reliant collective action of the rural poor in several Sri Lankan villages, and had given birth to an NGO called "Participatory Institute for Development Alternatives" (PIDA) to expand the work in other areas in Sri Lanka. PORP initiated in 1980 a "TCDC" project ("Technical co-operation among developing countries") for "cross fertilization" between rural development initiatives one in each of four countries – Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and the Philippines. In this TCDC project Rafael Espiritu Director of the Rural Workers Office of the Ministry of Labour of the Philippines government

who was executing an ILO-assisted project to assist low-income rural workers in the sugar-dominated crop communities in his country visited PIDA's work with two of his staff, and phoned me in Geneva from Colombo to say : "My whole conception of rural development has changed, and I am going to do it in the Philippines". And he did, to which I shall return.

"friends, not money"

Early in 1981 the Dutch multi-bilateral Mission visited the ILO to discuss support to ILO's technical cooperation programmes. I had not so far looked for multi-bi support for PORP's activities as my initial focus was more on research to develop understanding on the problematic of participation as well as to promote the method of participatory research, than on developing field projects. But one day I had a knock on the door of my office and the Dutch multi-bi Mission team was there to see me. They said they had heard of PORP and were very interested to know more about it. As I was explaining the philosophy and experiences of PORP to them their curiosity increased and they kept asking me questions after questions to the point of irritating me. I told them:

"Look, I have not sought any help from you, and I am very busy. You take this study of Bhoomi Sena and read it. I want to tell you that if a grass-root movement like this take any help from me I shall feel very honoured. If after reading of them you do not feel the same way, do not come back to me."

The Dutch Mission left with the Bhoomi Sena study and returned after a week, to say: "No further questions. How can we help you?" I said, "I am looking for friends, not money." They said, "You will have both friends and money". Thereafter I developed a few project ideas, in India and Malaysia and later in the Philippines, for small scale support with Dutch funds to assist grass-roots groups for economic and social co-operation. Of these the Philippine project named "Sarilakas" (meaning "self-strength", a concept that Rabindranath Tagore had also introduced as "*atmo-sakti*" – see Rahman 2006a) executed by Rafael Espiritu and his colleagues turned out as outstanding. To this I shall return.

PORP's work was getting known to other agencies in the UN system which were also moving toward including a people's participation content in some of their activities, and an Inter-agency Panel on People's Participation was constituted in 1981 with ILO being given the chair. Dharam Ghai wanted me

to chair this Panel, but I declined, saying that “I am a bit frightened at the thought of so many UN agencies landing on the rural poor to promote their participation, and to chair this Panel will also take a lot of my time away from the task of developing PORP”. Dharam Ghai, the extremely nice man that he was, did not push me further. He chaired the Panel himself, with considerable workload already as Branch chief and with his own research, only requesting me to be present in the Panel’s meetings to give my thoughts and advice to it.

Meanwhile, with small Dutch multi-bi assistance PORP helped Rafael Espiritu and his team in the Philippines to initiate middle of 1981 animation work to promote poor rural workers’ self-organising and collective economic and social action in four *barangays* (villages). From out of this initiative, reported in detail elsewhere (Rahman 1993), was born in October 1982 a new NGO by the name of PROCESS Foundation (Participatory Research, Organisation of Communities and education toward Struggle for Self-reliance), following the footsteps of the “change agents programme” in Sri Lanka developing into PIDA.

Project SARILAKAS was evaluated in July 1982 jointly by PORP (myself) and a Dutch Government Official, W. J. Veenstra. Mr. Veenstra told me when he landed in one of the barangays under the SARILAKAS project, that his office had resisted his spending seven days to visit this tiny, less than 40,000 US \$ worth project while typical Dutch Government assisted multi-bilateral projects were worth millions of dollars, and that Veenstra finally got approval for the mission saying that he wanted to see “what Anis was up to with his big talks of people’s self-reliance.” The following concluding words in Veenstra’s contribution to the report on evaluation of SARILAKAS are self-expressive:

“There is very definite trend towards self-development in the two areas [where the four project barangays were located]. Independent organisations are operating in all the barangays visited, and these have genuinely initiated a variety of activities. In my view experience in the Philippines has shown that it is possible with very modest resources to organise activities which directly benefit the poor and deprived in rural areas.

It was exactly for this reason that the Netherlands Government decided to support the SARILAKAS project as part of the ILO Participatory Organisations of the rural Poor Programme.” (Rahman 1983: p 43)

And PROCESS thereafter kept growing to become over a few years the largest non-church-based NGO in the Philippines, running also the *Sarilakas* quarterly bulletin on community development. As he had announced to me from Colombo after visiting PIDA's work in Sri Lanka in PORP's TCDC project, Rafael Espiritu, indeed, "did it!"

And in the same year (1982) PIDA in Sri Lanka which inspired the initiation of SARILAKAS in the Philippines via the TCDC tour to PIDA of Espiritu and his colleagues that PORP organized, got the Alternative Nobel Award of the Right Livelihood Foundation "for developing exemplary processes of self-reliant, participatory development among the poor in Asia" (Award citation: <http://www.rightlivelihood.org/recipe/pida.htm> ). EMPLOI proudly sent a minute to the Director-General saying that the ILO had lent a hand to the initiation of the work that grew into PIDA.

### PORP in Latin America

In the meanwhile Orlando Fals Borda had contacted me after reading the Bhoomi Sena study and we had met in a Conference in Ljubljana in 1980. The affinity of our thinking generated a process of close collaboration in taking Participatory Action Research forward that has continued since then. With Borda PORP developed a project of participatory research to be undertaken in three Latin American countries – Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua – under the title "Participatory research on the knowledge component of people's countervailing power" for implementation under his overall coordination. The project resulted in exemplary participatory research work particularly in Nicaragua in the region of *El Rigadío* (Fals Borda 1985).

Meanwhile Orlando invited me to present a keynote paper on the "Theory and Practice of Participatory Action Research" at the Tenth World Congress of Sociology held in Mexico in August 1982. This gave me an opportunity, by way of the *praxis* – action-reflection-action rhythm – of PORP itself, to (a) theoretically place participatory action research within the discourse on social transformation, and (b) review the question of validity of such research from the point of view of the concern on objectivity of research (Rahman 1982; 2007). While never considered as a "revolutionary", as I had told the Secretary of the ODA in London in 1987, I was particularly struck by the following reaction to my paper from Paul Sweezy, the then editor of the Marxist journal the *Monthly Review*, in a letter to me in 1984:

*“Reading it was an exciting experience for me. It indicates, I think, the direction in which revolutionary thought and practice must move. I was reminded throughout of nothing so much as the “theses on Feuerbach,” the true distillation of Marx’s thought”!*

Although not a Marxist I was all for releasing the creativity of the working class for which I considered participatory action research to be a very essential and important method. And I knew that orthodox revolutionary parties would not be very comfortable with this viewpoint. My trip to Mexico was combined with participation in a seminar held near Mexico of the coordinators of the participatory researches in Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua that Orlando had initiated for PORP. There I met Malena de Montis who had facilitated the Nicaraguan participatory research initiative. I asked her how she would explain that participatory research was permitted in “socialist” Nicaragua while in socialist countries research is done by the “Party” and not by the people. Malena replied that there was no Leninist “Party” in Nicaragua where the Sandinista revolution was a popular movement rather than a Party-led revolution, and in this movement the people often went ahead of the revolutionary intellectuals. She added that a Party was in the process of formation, but pro-people intellectuals were eager to see that this did not shift the balance of power against the people. And, of course, an Action Research theorist of the stature of Paul Oquist was in a top position in the revolutionary government. The potential of participatory research in Nicaragua, therefore, was high. The sad experience of how PORP missed fulfilling this potential “by an inch” as it were will be recounted in due course.

Meanwhile Dennis Hodsdon of EDUC was following the progress of PORP with positive interest. In March 1983 EDUC hosted an Inter-regional Workers’ Education Symposium of national and International Trade Unions where he invited me to present PORP’s field experiences in a paper on “Some Educational Approaches in Rural Workers’ Struggles.” A comparative review in the *Community Development Journal* (1982, No. 3) of research on participation under ILO’s PORP, UNRISD and FAO gave a clear edge to PORP. These achievements, along with the Evaluation of the Philippine SARILAKAS project, caught the attention of DGA/TEC, who called and gave me the important task of preparing an Office Policy Paper on the ILO’s Role in Promoting People’s Participation in Rural Development.

### a sadly missed opportunity

While I was preparing myself for this task, a unique opportunity came for me, and for the ILO, from Nicaragua. Following the participatory research work in *El Rigadío* under the project coordinated by Fals Borda and facilitated on the ground by Malena de Montis, I had a letter from the President of UNAG – the “Union of National Agriculturists and Ganadores”, a national organization of agriculturists and cattle raisers in Nicaragua, to help this organisation develop and execute a national programme of participatory research in Nicaragua. Receiving an invitation of such a moment, to help Nicaragua to be the first socialist country to launch a national programme of participatory research, I immediately phoned Willem Veenstra at the Hague to ask if the Dutch Government would be interested in funding such a programme. Veenstra discussed with colleagues in his Ministry and came back to say that a Dutch Project Identification Mission would be going to Managua late in March, and that if I could go there at the same time we could together develop the programme and that Dutch multi-bi funding of it through PORP would be ensured. I had my ticket to fly to Managua on March 28 1983.

Then came unexpected resistance from within the Office. Mr. Jain called me a few days before I was to fly to Managua, with REL/EMP (Employers’ Relations) chief sitting with him. UNAG had been sent by the Government of Nicaragua to sit in the Employers’ bench in the ILO’s Governing Body, and the Employers’ Group had questioned its credentials to sit in this bench as UNAG was not an “employers’ organisation”. The ILO’s Governing Body had in response to this objection constituted a Credentials’ Committee to look into the credentials of UNAG to sit in the Employers’ bench. If at this stage the Office developed collaboration with UNAG this would, according to REL/EMP, compromise the task of the Credentials’ Committee!

Mr. Jain wanted to save the intended project. He asked me to check with UNAG if the project could be officially signed by some government agency in Nicaragua while UNAG could handle the actual execution with which the ILO would not deal. I cabled accordingly to UNAG, but got back the reply that the Nicaraguan government opposed this idea and considered UNAG to be the most competent agency to execute this project. (Perhaps the

Nicaraguan government also saw “the game”!). I had to cancel my mission to Managua.

Utterly frustrated, I wrote a minute to Mr. Jain saying how the ILO was missing a great opportunity to promote participatory research nationwide in a socialist country, to help develop “socialism with a human face”. Mr. Jain also saw the point, and forwarded my minute to the Director-General, writing himself also that the ILO was “missing an opportunity”. The file ended there - the Director-General, of course, had the ILO’s Governing Body to satisfy.

The Dutch Mission went to Managua as planned. As I checked by e-mail the date of their Mission with Willem Veenstra while writing this account, Willem wrote to me (on 14.11.06), “*the Nicaraguans were very receptive of PORP type of approaches at the time*”.

I wonder, if my mission would have materialized, the assertion of people power through participatory research would have given Daniel Ortega – and the Nicaraguan revolution – victory against the Contras in the 1990 election!

#### Policy Paper on Office work on participation

Upon recovering from this sad failure to “do it” in Nicaragua I engaged myself to prepare an “Issues Paper” preliminary to the Office Policy Paper on “The ILO’s role in Promoting People’s Participation in Rural Development that DGA/TEC had wanted from me. My draft, which was very carefully examined and endorsed by Dennis Hodsdon, was discussed in an in-house meeting chaired by Mr. Jain in May 1983. The final Policy Paper was issued by DGA/TEC to all Departments, Branches and other units of the Office on 23.3. 84. Following this, a document titled “Guidelines for ILO Activity for the Promotion of People’s Participation in Rural Development” prepared by me operationalising the principles outlined in the Policy Paper and signed by Mr. Jain was issued on 2.4.85. These Guidelines called for sensitisation at various levels of the Office in the participatory principle, seeking participatory expertise in implementing Office programmes, collaboration with NGOs doing participatory work – a principle admitted for the first time as an ILO policy -, the promotion of self-reliance of poverty groups with small-scale group- based funding in order not to make them dependent on external funding, promotion of participatory

structures of such groups, emphasis on autonomy and power of assisted groups, catalytic organising work by committed outsiders who would make themselves progressively redundant, linking up of participatory organisations of the poor, and participation evaluation of Office projects with the base groups/organisations.

Christmas as a saving grace!

But of course it is not possible to transform the “ideology” of all officials by “guidelines”. For reasons that need not be discussed here, the Regional Office of the ILO in Latin America was particularly “reactionary” in its attitude to popular initiatives. Orlando Fals Borda developed a technical cooperation project with a popular movement in Colombo to assist their economic and social activities, which the Regional Office opposed rather strongly as “subversive”. It was just before Christmas of 1984, and Jack Martin with his inimitable humour submitted the matter to DGA/TEC, saying:

“Mr. Jain, if it were not for the fact that we are on Christmas eve, I would have made the following sarcasting remarks on the note of the Regional Office on this proposal...that the Regional Office has not read or understood the Office Policy Paper on “the ILO’s role in Promoting People’s Participation in rural Development” ... But since this is Christmas eve, I shall refrain from making these remarks. I only ask you that you approve this project.”

And there came Mr. Jain’s reply after the Office reopened in January:

“I am happy that Christmas saved us from such acrimonies between colleagues in the Office! I have examined the project proposal, and am approving it. And I hope that the Regional Office will keep in view the Office Policy Paper on The ILO’s Role in Promoting People’s Participation in rural Development in examining project proposals.”

“Bureaucrat goes to the roots”

Having articulated a theoretical basis of my work on Participation (in the Mexico Congress paper) and a significant experience base in participatory research and technical cooperation to promote participatory initiatives, I could now go on developing field projects for both participatory research and technical co-operation and organizing TCDC-type exchanges for mutual stimulation and cross-fertilization for participation promotion. And the possibility of attracting donor funding was more than I could handle or

would want to take. But I was feeling that I was myself running out of “field sense” and had started repeating myself. So I needed to tread on the “grass” again myself. I was also tormented for being away for so long from my own country. While the cause of my ‘exile’ had by then dissolved, I was now stuck abroad for education of my daughters - I could not torture them by returning to my country uprooting them from their schooling in a system completely different from that in Bangladesh, and they also put their own feet down in this respect. So I had to stay some more years abroad to see their education through.

How could I walk on the “grass” again working in the ILO in Geneva? It would be unrealistic to ask the Office to let me go to my country as and when it pleased me. I could ask for leave without salary to do so, but PORP also had to continue under someone of my stature if I would be absent for extended periods. I hit upon the following solution to my problem:

*I would take 4 months leave without salary from the Office every year for a few years to be in my country, and during these four months I would invite some intellectual-activist from different countries by turn every year to come and take my position in the Office taking my salary, and write about their field work and ideas and thereby enrich the PORP programme.*

I sounded some colleagues in the Office about this idea, and everyone said that this was an absurd proposal for a UN bureaucracy to which the Office would never agree. And if at all the Office gave me leave without salary for four months a year it would not agree to give me such command as I was thinking of proposing over the funds I would thus release: the money would go to the central kitty to be spent according to decisions of the Office. I nevertheless raised the proposal with Dharam Ghai and Jack Martin. They said that they would agree if PERSONNEL agreed. And PERSONNEL in all bureaucracies was notoriously known as the staunch custodian of Office procedures. Before making the proposal in writing I went to the chief of PERSONNEL.

And the chief of PERSONNEL was now the same Mr. Ameer Ali, who represented the one-man Commission to resolve the dispute I had with EDITRAD. Listening to my proposal Mr. Ameer Ali exclaimed: “*This is the most exhilarating proposal I have heard in this Office for years!*” And thanks to Mr. Ali who appreciated imaginative ideas so much my extraordinary proposal was approved.

As reported in the Press, (*The Daily Gulf Times*, Oct 2, 1985), the “Bureaucrat went to the roots”, taking special leave without pay for four months September-December first in 1984. And who could take the helm of PORP at the ILO for these first four months than Orlando Fals Borda? Orlando came at my invitation, and wrote a synthesis of the results of the participatory research project he had coordinated in Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua that contains such valuable guidelines for work with popular groups to promote their participation (Fals Borda 1985).

In Bangladesh I myself visited works of two NGOs in the villages – BRAC and Proshika. Reflecting upon their works I gave them my views (Rahman 1993: pp 62-73). And upon returning to the Office I submitted to it a “Non-Mission Report” in order to share my field experience with colleagues in the Office.

#### sounding Africa

So far PORP had not worked in Africa, and my colleagues in the ILO had warned me that Africans are very “nationalistic” and would not easily take “foreign ideas” for their development. Dharam Ghai, a Kenyan national, had also appeared rather cautious about the idea of PORP invading Africa. In July-August 1985 I took a low-key mission to Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya to visit government and non-government agencies to explore possible interest in PORP’s ideas. And PORP was grasped in Julius Nyrere’s Tanzania.

I was in the office of Mr. Keenja, Principal Secretary of the Rural Development Ministry in, in a one-day mission in Tanzania, presenting to him PORP’s ideas and experiences. After hearing me for a while Mr. Keenza intensely grasped my elbow and said, “Mr. Rahman, we have a project here to promote village development through people’s participation which is rotting in the seminar room of intellectuals. Can you help us take this project from the seminar room to the field?”

The project was “Planning Rural Development at the Village Level” (PRDVL) , a UNICEF-UNDP-ILO (EMP/RU outside of PORP)-assisted government project launched in 1984 to initiate self-sustaining development based on villagers’ own resources. The project had not seen the field in more than one year of its life, spending money in academic seminars of research

scholars. At my suggestion Mr. Keenja wrote to EMP/RU for assistance of PORP in this project. Subsequent development of this project is recounted in due course.

### treatise on the Animator

In 1985 Fall I went again to Bangladesh on four-months special leave without pay and brought to take my place in the ILO Professor Susanta Tilkaratna of the University of Colombo who was then acting as the coordinator of PIDA in Sri Lanka. I asked him to look at all PORP documents to date and use these materials to write a treatise on “The Animator in Participatory Rural Development.” On this work (Tilakaratna 1987), to which I added “windows” to show the “field”, here is Orlando Fals Borda:

“I like it not only for its contents but also for its presentation. The idea of Windows is tops, and the drawings really help the reading. This is combining levels 1 and 2 according to previous literature, as I tried to do in the Historia Doble de la Costa...So you can understand how pleased I am with this publication which gives me an impetus to our intellectual and practical challenge.” (letter dated October 9, 1987).

And from Norman Uphoff from the Cornell University Rural Participation Programme: “this publication was the best philosophically grounded statement of the social methodology of bottom-up development promoted by animators/catalysts.” (letter dated Nov 15, 1987).

And with this work on the animator, as Professor Sam Moyo submitted later in an assessment of the impact of PORP’s work in Africa, PORP sought to “*put into practice the concept of PAR by instituting a training dimension and as such offering a disciplinary approach to the subject. One feels that after such an attempt a new sub-set form of inquiry has been legitimated.*” (Moyo 1990: p 14)

### an extraordinary gesture by PERSONNEL

And upon return from Bangladesh I presented another “Non-mission Report” to the Office (Rahman 1993: pp 95-117). In addition to positive feedbacks that I received upon it from colleagues in the Office this gesture

on my part evoked an altogether extraordinary action by PERSONNEL that belies any notion one may have of the rigidity of UN bureaucracies.

The education grant for children that UN officials get in view of the high cost of education in international schools was reduced for me by half in view of my being absent for four months on leave without salary. Why half? I protested, submitting that I was being on such leave for one-third of the concerned years. PERSONNEL replied that the rule applied to the proportion of the school-year (September to April) that an official would be on such leave. I protested, saying that the rule was unfair, as I gave two-third of my time to the Office so that I should get two-third of the educational allowance, and as my daughters had to go to the International School and I had to pay for this for the whole school year. The Deputy Chief of PERSONNEL Mr. Bourgeois asked me to see him. I saw him, and he asked for the “Non-mission Reports” I had submitted to the Office for the two years. Then he submitted a memo through his chief (then Jean-Pierre Petit-Pierre) to the Director-General proposing that, in view of my dedication to my country which I had served during my period of unpaid leave, as well as to the Office whom I fed with my insights from the field even though I was not required to do so, I be given *full* educational allowance by an exception to the service rules. Such exception had to be agreed by the Director-general who also had to report the matter to the Governing Body. The Director-general approved this and the decision was duly reported to the Governing Body. \_Again, how wrong was my friend Marc Nerfin who had advised me not to join the ILO fearing its bureaucracy would stifle me!

summing up by Mr. Jain of insights from PORP’s work

Meanwhile, my “non-Mission report” for 1985 presenting my field notes on grass-roots work of NGOs with the rural poor in Bangladesh and my reflections thereupon had been sent by Jack Martin to CABINET through DGA/TEC early in February 1986. The Director-General responded positively, and drew attention to the need for clarifying the ILO’s role in this area. In end July 1986 Mr. Jain summed up in a note to the Director-General the insights obtained from “some pioneering work in this field” within the Office that was showing the limitation of the “government-employer-worker mechanism” to which the ILO had so far given emphasis, in improving the conditions of the rural poor. Most of such category of rural workers did not have any employer at all and had problems with local authorities, with the legal and land tenure systems, the rural money lender or the trading

middlemen. These groups needed collective action to improve their lives and needed external animators to promote this without creating a relation of dependence. The development of PROCESS from the ILO's tiny Sarilakas project in the Philippines, and of PIDA from the "change agents programme" were examples of such catalytic agencies that promoted the development of rural workers' organisations, which were organisations of the "trade-union type" for both pressure-group and development work satisfying the principles of ILO's Convention 141 and Recommendation 149 although not trade unions themselves. Hence the ILO needed to work both with trade unions and "voluntary bodies" like NGOs and also seek to bring these two quarters together, to improve the conditions of a great bulk of the rural poor.

I could not myself have summarized more cogently the lesson for the ILO that PORP's work indicated. Such a summary could only have come from a visionary at a high policy level of the ILO that Mr. Jain was.

visit by chief of EDITRAD!

And about this time I had another unexpected visitor to my office – the new Chief of EDITRAD, Ms. Josephine Karavasil, who had taken over upon retirement of the previous chief. Ms. Karavasil sat down very informally, saying that she had come to say how much she and her colleagues in EDITRAD enjoyed reading the materials coming from PORP! Quite some change from the intense struggle I had with EDITRAD to publish PORP's first collection of people's point of view!

The third term of my unpaid leave – Fall 1986 - was given to Dr. Yunus running the Grammen Bank in Bangladesh. Dr. Yunus came, but was unable to stay for more than a month-and-a-half that was not very eventful.

"thank you for telling us that we are not poor!"

Meanwhile I had read about the outstanding work that the Organisation of Rural Association for Progress (ORAP) in Matabeleland province in Zimbabwe was doing by way of collective development effort by villagers mobilizing themselves through clusters of families at village levels to village and inter-village organisations federating at the highest level into ORAP. I wrote to ORAP early in 1986 simply for an exchange of literature, sending some PORP literature and asking for theirs. In reply I got a letter from

Sithembiso Nyoni, the poet-philosopher-guide of ORAP, saying that they had not expected such literature from a UN bureaucracy, and asking when I would visit them. Subsequently ORAP invited me to present a paper in a public seminar they were holding with their donors in April 1987, giving the title of my paper as “The concept of Community Participation through family to attack the vicious circles of hunger and poverty.” I wrote to them saying that I could not go to their seminar as the ILO was not a donor of ORAP. In reply Nyoni wrote that they considered the ILO to be their most important donor – donor of ideas that they were getting from PORP documents. When I showed this letter to Jack Martin he said, “Anis, you should go – the Department will pay.”

I wrote the paper that ORAP asked me to write, but my thrust in it was to attack ORAP for thinking of “the vicious circle of hunger and poverty”. Who said that they were poor? They had just been liberated from domination, and the way they were moving forward through their imaginative initiatives was extraordinary, with the whole world wanting to learn from them. With the mental richness that they had why should they hold themselves back by thinking that they were poor? The paper was translated into Sindebele language by them, and as I landed from the dais after giving my presentation streams of villagers, students, NGO personnel, etc. queued up to shake hands with me and to say, “you have hit us very hard, but we have appreciated it.” And at night after we had our dinner in the camp on the field and was strolling outside in the dark a village blacksmith came to me and, talking proudly of his involvement in ORAP’s activities, slapped me heavily on my back and said several times, “O Mr. Rahman, thank you so much for telling us that we are not poor”!

I felt as if I had lifted a heavy burden from his shoulders and he could now breathe freely. Upon returning to Geneva I told my wife: “I have got my Nobel Prize”!

And from then on I stopped using the word “poor” myself to talk of the human being notwithstanding one’s economic status as to him/her ‘God’ has transferred his/her creative powers – à la Michelangelo’s famous painting of the “Creation of Adam”-, a power that cannot be appropriated by any oppressor.

“from the seminar room to the field”

Meanwhile, following the request of Mr. Keenja for assistance in taking Tanzania's PRCVL project "from the seminar room to the field" PORP sent Tilakaratna to Tanzania. In the style of sensitisation of animators in Sri Lanka's "Change agents' Programme" Tilakaratna sensitised fourteen animators to work in fourteen villages of Dodoma district in Tanzania to promote people collective self-reliant development initiatives. Numerous people's groups – men's and women's - resulted, pooling cash or buffaloes as collective savings to move on toward a path of collective self-development. As I visited the project in 1987 one Mr. Matoke came to see me, introducing himself as head of the research cell of the CCM party. He said that the coordinator of the PRDVL project had been summoned by the Party to explain what he was doing by way of mobilizing villagers outside the cooperatives ordained by party. When he explained and recounted what was happening, Julius Nyrere who was present there had commended the work saying that promoting people's participation thus was what the Party wanted to do but had failed to do. Mr. Matoke was thereafter assigned by the Party to investigate on the ground what was happening in the project, and after investigating this he had come to thank me and the ILO for what we had done.

As I attended a large inter-group mass meeting in a village under the project the chairman of the village cooperative said that his task had been to mobilize the villagers for self-reliant development, but he had failed to do so and this project had done it, and that he would request that ILO did not take away the project. Cutting short of other fulfilling personal details, here are extracts from an assessment of this effort by Professor Sam Moyo:

*"A very specific and specially regarded way in which EMPRU had attempted to influence policy in Tanzania had been through the PRDVL, based on PORP's initiatives in participatory development...Policy makers judge this initiative to have been so successful at its pilot phase, such that there now existed financial and manpower constraints to its wider institutionalisation in the face of encouraging governmental support. Numerous rural self employment and income-generating groups had been initiated in Tanzania through the PORP methodology...there has been regional and international dissemination of the projects' activities in workshops, and it appears that newly developed concepts of "participatory extension services" [i.e., animation-facilitation work – present author], resulting*

*from the PRDVL could have wider African application.” (Moyo, op cit., pp 25-26).*

pure technical cooperation untainted by money!

PORP’s experiences with participatory research, technical cooperation with national groups to promote grassroots collective economic and social action and people’s self-reviews, and conceptualization and guidelines presented in Fals Borda and Tilakaratna’s synthesising works were used to develop “Conception of a programme of training for the promotion of participatory rural development”, suggesting approaches to “training” (“sensitization”/capacitation/self-clarification through collective reflection) of external and internal animators and trainers themselves of animators, and also to developing facilitating personnel from the wider public to promote people’s participatory processes. This conception paper was sent out to a wide mailing list of NGOs. Salutary response in particular from The African Centre for Human and Cultural Development (ACHCD) in Ghana, which wrote to me in 1988 that they had initiated a year-long training programme following the approaches in this paper. I submitted this letter proudly to the Department as an example of “pure technical cooperation by the ILO *untainted by money!*”

toward grassroots solidarity in Africa

Subsequently, PORP organized in July and August 1989 two regional workshops of trainers of NGOs in Africa – one in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe hosted by ORAP which I attended myself and another in Burkina Faso hosted by the “Six S” movement attended for PORP by Philippe Egger who had joined PORP in 1982 to give me a hand. In these workshops the methodology of “no lectures-only-collective-self-analysis” and to stand up and assert themselves was followed with participants who had been used to lecture-kind training programmes. By way of an assessment of the Bulawayo workshop, Professor Sam Moyo wrote in his “Impact of EMPRU Research in Africa (*op.cit*; p 16)”, that

*“What is significant about the workshop participants’ position was that they held a shared world view of the participatory development based on Freirian “conscientisation” or “animation” principles, within a particular southern African politico-historical experience. The workshop, thus, presented a challenge to the participants to*

*further an evolving need for “very strong African solidarity across nations” and the need for “networking among grassroots workers, in order to break the existing communication barriers so that they need not go through proxies” in development. The workshop was, therefore, able to instill the participants’ own self confidence in articulating and being in control of their own destiny.”*

And William Tengey Director of ACHCD in Ghana who attended both the workshops wrote to the chief of EMP/RU (then Samir Radwan as Dharam Ghai had left on August 1987) that “these two workshops were, in my opinion, some of the most valuable and worthwhile meetings I have attended in my 20 years or so working with grassroot organisation and non-government organisations”.

So Africa also responded, contrary to initial warnings I had received from some colleagues.

#### people’s self-reviews

Meanwhile PORP had been advocating and promoting self-reviews (self-evaluations) of grassroots groups of their own experience in collective effort as part of the conception of *praxis* (cycle of action and reflection) in participatory research. Self-review processes in Kenya, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Rwanda, and Mali were initiated, the latter four in francophone African countries assisted by Philippe Egger. After the fall of Berlin Wall PORP was also able to initiate people’s self-reviews in two villages and with a gypsy community in Hungary. The people’s self-review process was particularly insightful in one of these villages where so-called “socialism” had eroded the traditional culture of community self-deliberation of the villagers driven by suspicion and fear that authoritarian “socialism” had brought to them, so that it was some effort for the animator there to get the villagers to get together again for collective deliberation. (Biro & Szuhay 1990).

“you have given a lecture, Sir!”

With all such fulfilling works, the greatest lesson for me came in a workshop of trainers of grass-roots development agencies of south and South-east Asia that PORP organised in August 1988 in Tagaytay, the Philippines. In typical PORP style the participants had been invited to take over the workshop

notwithstanding big names like Anisur Rahman and Tilakaratna being present there from whom, it was announced, “there would be no lectures.” But toward the end of the ten-day workshop the participants got stuck with one particular question, and I thought I knew “the answer”. After I finished my longish “I know it” kind of intervention that was totally contrary to the PORP culture that I had been preaching, up went the hand of one participant from Thailand: “*All this is very nice, Sir, but you have given a lecture!*” I walked down to him and handed to him the umbrella I was carrying because of the rain outside, and said, “I have slipped – you beat me with this umbrella.”

As one animator from the SARILAKAS project had once written to me,

*“In this work you have to constantly fight your enemies, and the greatest enemy is yourself!”*

EDITRAD releasing copyright of collection of PORP’s papers

Early in 1990 I submitted a collection of my papers to EDITRAD for clearance for publication either by the ILO or by an outside publisher. In sharp contrast to EDITRAD’s tough negative attitude earlier, Mrs. Karavasil in her review commended, first, PORP’s ideas having over the years become “extremely influential in development practice”. She commented on the political sensitivity of my writings which might not be to the liking of some of the ILO’s constituents, in that they challenged existing power structures, in both “liberal” and “socialist” states, that prevent people controlling their own destiny. However, citing this not as a reason for the ILO itself to decline to publish “what would be a stimulating and inspiring collection”, Mrs. Karavasil cited the ILO’s budgetary constraint to publish this collection, releasing the copyright of the papers for publication by an outside publisher. Deft positive handling of a rather sensitive question.

The collection was published by ZED Books (Rahman 1993), explicitly acknowledging the ILO’s PORP programme as the source of most of the papers therein.

the demise of PORP

Dharam Ghai left the ILO in 1987 to become head of UNRISD; Jack Martin left EMPLOI in 1988; Dennis Hodsdon retired in 1988; Mr. Jain and the Director-General both in 1989. The Fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled change in the “political-economy” environment in the world with the emergence of a uni-polar globe with no rival social ideology. PORP had been born, and nourished, in an environment of search of “liberal” to “progressive” forces seeking to promote people’s wellbeing without falling into totalitarian traps that were being offered in the name of people’s “liberation”. As the totalitarian threat dissolved, the ILO gradually relapsed into working more with governments than with non-government agencies, and more on labour standards to promote workers’ rights in traditional tripartite frameworks. EDUC and REL/TRAV were no longer as warm to PORP. And the new hierarchy above PORP hardly understood or cared to understand its message. EMPLOI itself was reorganized under the new name “Employment Policy” and EMP/RU disappeared as a branch. The Programme and Budget proposals for the biennium 1991-92 that were being framed did not show a place for PORP. As a permanent official I could retain my job somewhere in the Office in the headquarters or in the field, but without a ‘mission’.

Feeling lonely and not wanted any more I took early retirement at the end of 1990, and Dharam Ghai organized a very warm farewell for me at the UNRISD.

Looking back at one of the most fulfilling phases of my career, I was lucky to have the support and assistance of some extraordinarily dedicated personalities within the ILO to be able to keep climbing. This belies all notions of a UN bureaucracy to consist only of ‘bureaucrats’.

The credit for what PORP was able to do in a particular phase of world history goes, first, to Dharam Ghai, the imaginative pro-“poor” chief of EMP/RU who conceived this programme and invited me to parent it; thereafter to Dennis Hodsdon the tough but honest trade unionist who had the power to knock PORP out in the very first round but gave it such solid support; to Jack Martin, a humanist with such warmth and wit; to Mr. Jain, a man of vision combined with brilliance in handling bureaucracies trained in the highest tradition of Indian Civil Service; to Ameer Ali, also from the same tradition, with open arms to support imaginative ideas; to Mrs. Ahmed who guided me to find my way through the corridors of the bureaucracy with my background as a simple university teacher; to Philippe Egger who

worked as my right hand in the Office and carried PORP's message to the Francophone countries; to Mrs. Karavasil who had the courage and commitment to release for publication sensitive materials bearing the name of the ILO. And my secretaries Lynda Pond and Evelyn Ralph were so involved with my work that they kept correcting not only my English but also my substantial lapses with "do you really want to say this?", and offered to type any material from me free of cost even after I would return to my country if I would mail these to them.

The spirit of PORP was reborn in 2002 in the national context in Bangladesh with the creation of "Research Initiatives, Bangladesh" (RIB) with Participatory Action Research and search for and presentation of "Creative Initiatives of the disadvantaged in Bangladesh" as two of its major niches (vide "Dream seven", RIB 2002 pp 23-2, RIB website: [www.rib-bangladesh.org](http://www.rib-bangladesh.org), and Rahman 2006,), funded by the Netherlands government in whom one gets "both friends and money" and no interference. I invite all to follow the work of RIB.

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<sup>i</sup> The account is a recapitulation partly from documents in the possession of the author and partly from memory. The quotes in the paper are from memory unless cited otherwise, so that none but the author is responsible for them.