

Anthropology, Participatory Research and Development Cooperation: A Necessary Dialogue



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Abstract

Le domande sul “perché e per chi” if it generates conoscenza [1] sono da tempo a chiave per anthropological discipline. At the present time, it is always the case that it is important for the dissemination of the risultati, poiché il sapere prodotto in such a way that it can be used positively in the realta study. This line of thought is directed towards the end of the rifle and the gli obiettivi of the progetti of cooperation to the sviluppo, in particolare i micro-progetti.

The text presents some concrete cases in which, as an anthropologist, I directed cooperation projects and community formation processes in indigenous areas of Mexico. These experiences reveal the need for integrating anthropological research and cooperation activities, in which the researcher’s work has facilitated the identification of key issues for the intervention and the relationship with the community that hosted it. Secondly, the necessary complementarity of knowledge for the integral interpretation of reality and the consequent design of cooperation projects became evident. Thirdly, the enhancement of local organizational structures guarantees the strength and durability of the results obtained through cooperation activities.

Keywords: Participatory research; Development cooperation; Anthropology; Mexico

Introduction

“We do not ask for your help, rather we want you to come and share our cause and our struggle.” This is what Juan told me, representing a Zapatista indigenous village in Chiapas, in southern Mexico, during my first research trip for the realization of my thesis in Ethnology. An irrefutable ethical statement that should accompany every research or cooperation project, both too often marked by welfarist or ethnocentric legacies.

At the age of twenty, I found a way to reach the south-east of Mexico by participating in a project of “cooperation from below” directed by a small Italian NGO: for a month, I found myself with other volunteers doing masonry work for the construction of a turbine that equipped the village with electricity. In the twenty years that followed, anthropological research turned into my life project, always intertwined with projects of cooperation and community formation in indigenous areas of Mexico. Juan’s words have turned into the ethical compass that, both in research and in cooperation, has always sought the joint construction of projects and results with the stakeholders. The experiences realized also reveal the need for the integration of anthropological research and cooperation activities, in which the researcher’s work facilitated the identification of key issues

for the intervention and the relationship with the community that hosted it.

Discussion

Anthropology and cooperation: from coloniality to participation

First of all, I stress the obvious parallelism between anthropology, as a social science, and development cooperation, which have in common a colonial or neo-colonial root. The anthropological discipline developed, historically, with the declared objective of producing knowledge on the Others, indigenous and native populations, object of the colonial domination. Also, in Mexico, the exceptional development of the discipline since the thirties is part of the same process, expression of the nationalist policies of state strengthening, assimilation and control of cultural diversity, defined by González Casanova [2] as internal colonialism.

Secondly, “development cooperation” also bears the colonial mark defined by the controversial term “development”. The criticisms of the concept are manifold; among the many authors, I would like to mention here only [3-5] which from distinct

perspectives have shown how development implies the action of transforming subjects and directing them to change towards an objective defined elsewhere: “progress”, often to the detriment of the way of life, the relationship with the environment and the cosmovision of the “subjects / objects” of development itself. The limits and potential of cooperation have long been highlighted by the current anthropology of development or anthropology of development [6-9].

Starting from the identification of the common colonial and neo-colonial brand, the reflections on the relevance and purpose of the research or of the cooperative intervention are also common; on the recipients and producers of the knowledge produced or shared, on the ways in which these are produced. Finally, the question concerning the “why and for whom” social sciences create knowledge, formulated by Robert Lynd since 1939, continues to be central to the anthropological discipline. The construction of knowledge, infrastructure or training are processes that have in common the objective of transforming existing reality, and as such require the active participation of both the local population as well as researchers and cooperators. If anthropology is understood as a political practice, and therefore with a relevant theoretical substrate, a complex ethnography and a political commitment, it can therefore have a real impact in cooperation policies and projects: it would be the passage from an anthropology of development to a post-development anthropology [10].

With the intention of subverting the neocolonial heritage, research approaches have been developed since the 1960s that favor the participation of those who previously were considered only “objects of study” and, subsequently, objects of the intervention of public policies and processes of building ethnically hierarchical societies. It is in this age that, in different countries, the enhancement of “local” or “popular” knowledge is growing and the proposal of participatory action research (IAP) promoted by Fals-Borda in the Seventies is born. The centrality of research as a tool for the transformation of society also characterizes the approaches marked by the reflection on the intrinsic colonial brand or coloniality of power and knowledge [11], or those focused on methodological reflection, such as activist or militant anthropology [12]. With increasing frequency, research projects are developed in which the “subjects of study” actively participate, from the definition of the themes or co-licensing [13] to the dissemination of the results, since the knowledge produced in this way can be used for affect positively in the studied reality.

Participatory action research is at the same time a research methodology and a social transformation project, since it involves the active participation of the population, which goes from being an object to the subject of research aimed at social change [14]. The question of Lynd on why, for whom and how to do research is equally fitting if transposed to the theme of international cooperation. The emphasis on participation in

all phases of social transformation is key in the decolonization process, both in anthropology and in cooperation. Both pass both for a democratization of projects and activities (research and development cooperation), which in order to acquire cognitive and social effectiveness and relevance must be forcibly shared and consensual with the subjects. The active participation of the collective subjects involved in the project is fundamental, from the identification of the problem, to its analysis (object of the participatory research) up to the elaboration of the intervention project, its planning and the realization of the activities (objective of the projects of cooperation). In this sense, there is a necessary relationship of continuity between anthropological research and participatory and bottom-up cooperation projects [9] a field of action studied and theorized by the current anthropology for development [15] or development anthropology [7].

Anthropology and cooperation: an experience from the field

The experience of one of the various cooperation projects in indigenous regions of Mexico in which I participated allows me to exemplify some further reflections. This is the Community Communication Project promoted by the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias, in the Costa Chica and Montaña regions of the state of Guerrero. Between 2005 and 2014 I carried out research activities in the area, and in particular on the activities of the organization mentioned, which brings together different indigenous peoples. The relationship of trust built with the organization and with the inhabitants of the villages, thanks to a method of participatory research, meant that I was shared a need that had been identified for some time: the impulse to one’s own, direct means of communication to facilitate the exchange of information both within the region and externally [16]. The collective discussion led to the definition of two main instruments: a network of community radios that spoke the indigenous languages of the region and gave space to local problems, and a web page that spread the activities of the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias.

The first requested contribution was in the participated elaboration of the project, and subsequently in the funding research. Cooperation agencies outside the region did not intervene in this case, but in a collaborative way (through assemblies in which the region’s indigenous authorities participated, and then village by village) a shared project was drawn up, and then they looked for the sources of financing. In this case, considering the micro character of the project, we turned to funding sources that did not require a high level of formality in the project (The German Umverteilen foundation; the cooperation sector of the Italian Region Trentino-Alto Adige through the mediation of an Italian NGO). In this context, the voluntary cooperation of the villages concerned with materials for the construction of radio studios, labor or money was fundamental. My role was, after the identification of the need and the participation in the elaboration of the project, substantially

that of mediator between the indigenous organization and the requests for funding, and the coordination of the activities that required the presence of subjects external to the region (training of young speakers and editors, installation of radios).

The role of the anthropologist can therefore provide different contributions to the world of cooperation. First of all, from the anthropological research work needs can emerge which are then channeled to the development of cooperation projects, favoring a real relevance of the projects. Secondly, anthropological knowledge, which consists of a profound knowledge of the cultures on which one acts, can provide a multiplicity of visions that guide cooperation and help it to define its interventions in a culturally appropriate way. According to Antonino Colajanni, an anthropologist who has worked on these issues for decades, the first thing to check for a future project is its "socio-cultural sustainability" that can be ascertained with a survey on local capacities to generate resources, with skills, knowledge, interests and vision of the future. The best idea is to ensure that the next intervention does not create dependence but stimulates local capacities [17]. An anthropologist does this by profession: he observes, questions, tries to understand, listens, feels, sees, understands the links between people and has a technical knowledge that allows him to collect this "forgotten dimension of development", the cultural one.

Complementarity of knowledge and enhancement of own knowledge

Collaborative anthropology, and truly such cooperation, have in common the enhancement of local skills and knowledge. In training activities on the subjects of popular communication, community journalism and radio communication aimed at the young operators and operators of indigenous radios installed in Guerrero, we have indeed invited external experts, but we have also and above all involved those subjects present in the territory (masters, lawyers, but also seniors, students and peasants) whose skills have been valued within the training activities. In this way the territorial rooting of the project is strengthened, and the knowledge that is conveyed is culturally appropriate; there is no need for a "translation" of the cooperation objectives because the project is acted by the subjects themselves. "Solo entre todos sabemos todo", explained a wixárika indigenous essay. The phrase highlights the necessary complementarity of local, cultured, popular, traditional and innovative knowledge for the integral interpretation of reality and the consequent design of cooperation projects. We are in the sphere defined by Sousa Santos as "ecology of knowledge", where "the credibility of a cognitive construction is measured by the type of intervention in the way it allows or prevents" [18].

Enhancement of local organizational structures

Following the discussion of the Community Communication Project in the assemblies inside each village, these collectively chose the people who would participate in the training activities

(mostly young people) and consequently they would then be in charge of the community radio operation. In this way the project was legitimized and appropriated within the local society and culture. The leaders of each of the three radios were then elected in the Regional Assembly (attended by all the representatives of the villages in the region). In this way that of "radio manager" becomes a public office, recognized and included in the traditional indigenous organizational structure; this guaranteed the durability of the results, since the vigilance on the good technical and organizational functioning of the radios was immediately assumed by the local communities.

Conclusion

The experience I told is of micro-cooperation, and obviously the cooperation on a larger scale, which implies a higher technological specialization and greater economic investment, faces more complex problems. In any case, I believe that the emphasis on sharing, participation and the substantial democratization of cooperation, as well as the production of knowledge that should accompany it, must be key elements to be privileged in activities at every scale, micro and macro. The anthropological sensitivity, attentive to cultural nuances and to complex social transformations, is also characterized by the continuous movement on the micro and macro scales of knowledge, and in this, I believe, its fundamental contribution to the world of cooperation should be enhanced and strengthened.

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