

Author Reflections

What follows are a few individual reflections from the authors of articles in this *IDS Bulletin* on why they used action research approaches and/or some of the critical issues that they see as important.

Danny Burns

Much of my work over the past years has been focused on how to develop participatory processes to work across large systems. What I have realised in writing for this *IDS Bulletin* is that there is a significant tension between an aspiration to be truly participatory (by which I mean that those inquiring have full ownership of the process) and an aspiration to engage effectively with the complex often hidden power flows which impact so significantly on our ability to create and sustain change. Systemic Action Research requires us to develop inquiry from multiple points within the system in order to surface and work with different interests and perspectives and to understand the power relationships between them. A systemic action research process is not driven solely by one set of participants. It is guided by the views and intentions of multiple actors within a learning system, and is driven in some sense by the issues. External facilitators (including me) have much greater power to determine which paths are navigated as the systemic inquiry unfolds – because they may be the only people that are involved in the whole of the process. The tension then is that Participatory Action Research is fully owned by a community, but it may not see all of the complexities of power that it needs to engage with. Systemic Action Research may surface more of these power relationships, revealing new opportunities for action, but the process is not held exclusively by those communities who hold less power. If we see PAR and SAR as two circles on a Venn diagram then it seems to me that we should aspire to be in the overlapping part of the circle. The Ghana community radio project (see Harvey, Burns and Oswald, this *IDS Bulletin*) may be the closest that my work has come to integrating these two. These tensions, which have profound implications for participatory facilitators, are at the centre of my current reflections on my own practise.

Robert Chambers

One hope for a better future is that the family of approaches to which those described in this *IDS Bulletin* belong, and the behaviours, attitudes and mindsets that go with them, will flourish, spread and become the norm for much in life. For this, they would have to come in from the peripheries to the core, and their values and orientations would have to become widespread and widely accepted. A world where this happened, and happened well, would, I believe, be a much better place. For that a critical need is to multiply facilitators who are at once creative, dynamic, and reflexive, and to do this on a vast scale. This points us to schools and universities. Most of these socialise students through top-down didactic modes of teaching and learning which are antithetical to nurturing facilitators. So we need radical changes in curricula, teaching and learning to give us new generations who as facilitators can transform our development practice. May this *IDS Bulletin*, however modestly, contribute to such changes. May many, many more come to make reflexivity, and participatory action research and learning, a way of living and being, and inspire others to do likewise.

Blane Harvey

My interest in participatory research approaches is well-described by John Heron's assertion that 'If you choose to regard your subjects as self-directing agents, whose creative thinking determines their actions, then you cannot do research on them or about them, but only with them'. For the research we conducted in Ghana and described in this *IDS Bulletin* this was an obvious approach to take given the strong capacity and sense of direction of our partners in the Ghana Community Radio Network. The work underscored how crucial strong, equitable and sustained partnerships are to participatory research in development; partnerships which are too often neglected in our focus on being

responsive to new funding opportunities, publishing, or simply in carrying on with the ‘business’ of our daily lives. Building on this, the learning dimension of action research, highlighted by many of the authors in this *IDS Bulletin*, applies not only to local participants in the research process, but to those of us entering communities from the outside. The lessons discussed in our article, therefore, are a testament to the two-way learning that can emerge from participatory research, building our collective capacity, understanding, and empathy when we challenge the researcher–researched divide and our perceived status as ‘experts’. None of this is automatic, however, which makes engagement in the action research process at once challenging and rewarding.

Alfredo Ortiz Aragón

As I make a gradual transition from action-oriented practitioner to action researcher I am struck by how inadequately the maps, matrices, words on cards, flip charts, action plans and other workshop artefacts actually represent the complex storyline that dynamically emerges in these shared spaces. As a ‘pure’ practitioner I considered these artefacts to be (and to have captured) the immediate and most important results of a workshop. Action research principles have helped me to approach shared spaces such as workshops more slowly and emergently, with more open questioning, reflection, active listening, and systematic documentation of the active stories in the room – found in the conversations, patterns of behaviour, energy, and power relationships that emerge in real-life interactive drama of which I am a part. The artefacts on the wall are props in the drama that complement but don’t capture the story. Action research helps me to pay attention to important undercurrents and less visible parts of the story that rarely make it onto the walls, but which are crucial for understanding organisational change.

Katy Oswald

For me, Participatory Action Research is qualitatively different from conventional research. This is because it involves collective analysis. As our experience in Ghana shows, participatory action research can provide a space for discussion and analysis amongst a group of practitioners and researchers, with different backgrounds and experiences, and therefore capture many different perspectives on how to analyse a question or

problem. It provides an opportunity to shift the power of analysis away from the ‘academic’ towards a collective analysis that includes a variety of perspectives. This does not make the power relations between the researchers and the ‘researched’ vanish completely, but it provides an opportunity for those who would normally be ‘subjects’, to be active agents in the process of analysis. I think this is a more honest approach to research, acknowledging that there are many different perspectives, and no ‘correct’ answer to a question.

Jethro Pettit

Action research is unfortunately often reduced to a focus on tacit methods, which are important but can distract from vital questions of process, purpose and ethics at the heart of any research for social change. For me participatory and action research are about placing considerations of power at the centre of inquiry. This includes the power of differently positioned actors in the process. But it also includes the power of knowledge – not only in the framing and use of findings, but in the very ways of finding out, understanding and expressing what is going on. The world of research, even action research, often privileges certain kinds of rational, analytical and textual representations, which themselves become and reproduce forms of power. The objectivity and reason of the European Enlightenment, while claiming to reduce subjectivities, can marginalise other world views and ways of knowing that emerge through cultural imaginaries, conversation, performance and expressions of feeling. In using action research to inquire into power with social change actors, I have found it invaluable to delve into these other ways of knowing. Using visual, embodied, creative and mindful methods can complement and ‘nest’ the analytical and conceptual insights and findings that will also arise. Drawing on innovations in reflective practice, postmodern aesthetics, phenomenology, theories of embodied cognition (from neuroscience), and Eastern and indigenous spiritual traditions, I see action research as offering exciting pathways to more diversified, power-balanced and robust approaches to creating knowledge and action.

Thomas Tanner and Frances Seballos

We were working with children. An action research approach enabled us to understand contexts of vulnerability and capacity that

inform risk from (amongst others) child-centred perspectives. Allowing the research to shape and be shaped by changing activities was crucial to understanding the complexity of these contexts and the ways that reducing risk often entailed challenging established power relations, including those between adults and children in the household and in the community. Our approach stopped well short of being emancipatory, with the research framework and design at least initially developed by the external researchers. Whilst participatory methods were employed, and much of the results and analysis was retained by the groups for later use in developing risk management responses, others remained more extractive, with a focus on enabling researchers to cross-compare findings between case study locations and countries. Nevertheless, in engaging children in a process of knowledge generation and analysis, the research attempted to break down some of the assumed hierarchies between researcher and researched common to orthodox approaches. At the same time, in working with participants to find practical solutions to challenge root causes of disaster vulnerability, the research was characterised by an adherence to the transformative rather than extractive tenets of action research. These are underpinned by Paolo Freire's concept of problematisation, analysis of lived experience through which people are able to challenge oppressive phenomena which may be taken as given and which they may unknowingly reproduce.

Joanna Wheeler

I use action research approaches out of a combination of pragmatism and a deeply held commitment to the values imbedded within my understanding of it. In my experience of working in contexts with high levels of violence, in which people are subject to extreme insecurity on a daily basis, an action research process is absolutely crucial in order to even begin to understand the complex social systems involved and to move beyond superficial discussions with more powerful members of the community. More conventional forms of research are simply inadequate to the task of responding to the highly unstable patterns of power and violence that pervades these contexts, and the silences this engenders. And yet, an action research approach in such settings (and probably in any setting) is far from risk-free. My commitment to the values of action research includes a belief that action research can offer those involved the opportunity to learn and generate knowledge that they find useful; that it can open possibilities for change on many levels from intimate to public policy spaces; and that the process itself can be more productive in many ways than any formalised research outputs – that for participants, the process itself is fundamentally about the potential of empowerment. This commitment to the values of action research is tempered by my experiences of the profound complexity of the process in practice – and that potential gains must always be contextualised in terms of the risks.