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Why undertake action research in partnership?

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2. Why undertake action research in partnership?

P. Gasselin and P. Lavigne Delville

Before we can discuss how to undertake action research in partnership, we have to ask: why do it at all? This chapter provides answers.

Both in its philosophy and in its approach, ARP breaks with the conventional modalities of agricultural and rural development research. It aspires to respond to the new requirements of research, to be more suited to society's demands and needs, as well as to the evolving relationships between practitioners, citizens, users, and researchers. It aims to structure the research and action processes together, a co-production of knowledge and solutions by researchers and stakeholders.

Such an ambition depends on cooperation between professional researchers and stakeholders striving to create the dynamics of change. ARP requires the establishment of partnerships between the different stakeholders and a joint management of the research process.

Main justifications

Why would researchers conduct an ARP with farmers? Why would social stakeholders collaborate with researchers in undertaking a project to transform rural society? Why would businesses and territorial communities invest resources in research? These questions have been the subject of several studies in philosophy, educational sciences, sociology, history of sciences, management sciences, and other disciplines. Most of the answers advanced are not specific to the agricultural world, but can be derived from the wider evolution affecting society and science.

ARP justifies itself on two broad fronts. The first relates to the socio-political domain: the role of knowledge creation in the processes of change and the relationships that researchers have with practitioners, users, and citizens. The second relates to the epistemological domain: the design of knowledge and of science. The "action" aspect and social utility of knowledge is as important as the "knowledge creation" aspect.

New legitimacy of stakeholders and their knowledge

New questions for agricultural research

Changes observed in the last three decades in rural development and the new roles played by agriculture (market or non-market, political, economic, social, environmental) add impetus to the questions addressed by agricultural research.

These questions, which were predominantly technical, "What techniques should be invented and widely disseminated to help farmers in their activities?" became, in the 1990s, socio-technical: "Why aren't the techniques offered being used? How to ensure their adoption?" Today the paradigm has shifted still further: "How to initiate innovation processes that meet the requirements of the concerned stakeholders?"

At the same time, it is increasingly being accepted that stakeholders affected by a problem – farmers, their professional organizations, businesses in the concerned sector, public authorities – have a legitimate right to question the work of researchers on agricultural and rural issues and to actually participate in tackling problems that may arise. According to some authors (Akrich *et al.*, 1988; Callon et al., 2001), their participation actually increases the chance of resolving the problem. The question then arises: how best to integrate them into the research process?

Scientific knowledge is not neutral

Changes in the rural sector are related to wider changes in the design of science and its relationship with society. In the 1990's, these changes marked a break with a redefinition of the role of the stakeholders. The idea of an neutral and objective science, capable by itself of defining problems, of being able to handle complex issues (for example, "What is a drug?," "What is a microbe?" or "What is an animal's well-being?") and to identify solutions, was being increasingly called into question (Stengers, 2002).

Some of the answers do depend on the political, socio-economic, and cultural context and on the strategies of the stakeholders concerned. Production of knowledge or the creation of a new technology cannot be envisaged without assessing its impact on the real world, especially the risks that may be introduced.

This position requires not only the researcher but also the judge, the journalist, the philosopher, the elected official, the consumer, and the

citizens to develop their own analyzes for participating in defining problems and identifying solutions. Nuclear accidents and agricultural, food, health, environmental crises, for example, require society to be more than a research sponsor or beneficiary. Society has to be responsible and make science everyone's affair by organizing the participation of all stakeholders in an extension of the democratic ideal.

Competent stakeholders with legitimate knowledge and concerns

Another major change is helping redefine the relationships between science and society. Science has long claimed to objectivize facts by creating knowledge that is different from "profane" knowledge, especially the knowledge of the concerned stakeholders (inevitably localized, biased due to social structures or their own agenda).

Today, an epistemological and social revolution has lead to the realization that the knowledge and skills of stakeholders have value in resolving a given problem. This can be collective knowledge, including that of organizations, institutions, technical services, or knowledge of individuals such as professionals, owners of specific expertise (farmers, technicians, entrepreneurs, craftsmen, workmen, etc.), or even citizens wanting to involve themselves in local public affairs. Their knowledge is practical in nature and does not replace scientific knowledge (Olivier de Sardan, 1995).

Researchers no longer have a monopoly on objectivity, using their research to distance themselves from the social world. The specific context also plays a determining role. Consequently, it is as much by the meeting of points of view and knowledge as by taking the real complexity into account that objectivity can be achieved. The skills of the stakeholders and the legitimacy of their concerns and knowledge are thus the underpinnings of a renewed scientific approach, of an "open-air science" which involves, or is even propelled by, the stakeholders concerned (Callon *et al*., 2001).

Research as a tool for learning and change

Stakeholders participation in defining and conducting the research process is also justified by social and political goals. Knowledge creation then becomes an adjunct, sometimes even a pretext, for involving participants in cross learning and/or in helping bring about transformations in social relationships (Freire, 1969; Touraine, 1978).

In such conditions, research can become a powerful tool to reinforce stakeholders' legitimacy as well as bolster their initiative and their ability to be heard. It is a matter of deepening the knowledge of the problems and issues at hand, of triggering a wider dialog that leads to a recognition of the problem being experienced by certain stakeholders, and of engaging collective processes of research and validation of solutions. In this context, ARP appears as an approach for a simultaneous production of knowledge and of new social relationships which are the result of a will to change and a research intent (Liu, 1997).

Researchers' involvement in an ARP can also be taken to be a voluntary approach for deeper interactions with stakeholders in the interest of bringing about changes and for a willingness to adopt values shared with the ARP collective (see Chapter 3 "Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach," page 41). It is one way of translating ethical and political requirements.

A response to social actors' new expectations

Social actors, whether they be considered citizens facing new problems, professionals, or users of a space or a service, have concerns and expectations. When research is defined only by researchers, as is the case with conventional research and based on concerns that are not those of the actors, it can only partially be successful in meeting their expectations. Only incomplete results are usually forthcoming, they are often delivered late, and not always presented to stakeholders or converted into a form suitable for them. Consequently, the real utility of conventional research is often limited.

Participatory research goes a little further in the dialog, but often it does not discuss the definition of the problem itself. ARP, on the other hand, not only puts the problem's definition up for discussion, but also the formulation of research topics and the structure of the research protocol. In addition, it includes a debate on the results. For these two reasons, it can arrive at responses more in line with stakeholder aspirations, which can, however, also be more demanding at times.

A need for effectiveness in an uncertain and complex context

ARP also enhances research relevance and effectiveness in uncertain and complex contexts.

Alliance between social actors and researchers

Social actors and researchers need each other in order to confront modern challenges. Scientific practice is becoming more reflexive, i.e., it questions itself on its objectives, on the methods used, and on the way the results are obtained. Its own shortcomings and failures stare it in the face: the inability to identify in time major dangers such as asbestos, mad-cow disease, or AIDS; the controversies amongst scientists on genetically modified organisms (GMO); and the inability to resolve major social issues such as unemployment, poverty, rural exodus, or the food crisis.

It is therefore essential to improve the way complex social issues are addressed by researchers and actors each of whom cannot act without the other. Sometimes this improvement is radical and substantial, especially when the ARP arrives at a solution or knowledge that it could not have without the concerned stakeholders' participation (a new equitable and efficient way of distributing irrigation water, for example). In other cases, this improvement cannot be objectively measured by its impact on society or on the knowledge base. In such cases, we content ourselves by describing the improvement in the collaboration process by hypothesizing that progress has been made in the way complex issues are handled, solutions found, and innovations discovered (see part 4, page 157).

Shared definition of problems

The questions that social groups ask of science are generally complex. For example: What are the risks of growing a GMO in open fields? What will be the impact of simplified agricultural techniques on the labor that will be replaced? Such questions call into play several factors whose dynamics are often unknown. Modeling the complexity of interactions (social, ecological, economic, etc.) and their dynamic nature to be able to make predictions remains an illusory dream.

The problem and its solution almost always depend on stakeholder perceptions. It is therefore necessary to try to define in advance the issue at hand, in as consensual a manner as possible, and then to work towards a satisfactory solution in a transparent manner with the stakeholders concerned.

Latour (2001) thus recognizes that all technical knowledge or object is a social construct resulting from an ongoing research process. Approaches called constructivist are mobilized to handle this

complexity; their scientific validity is now acknowledged and recognized. At the same time, several studies confirm that one learns best when working in a real-world situation. Only in such environments do stakeholder strategies emerge and it becomes possible to assess the feasibility of proposals (Breilh, 1997; Touraine, 1978).

Partnerships put researchers in contact with innovation as it happens

In diffusionist approaches, a new technique is invented in a research laboratory and then transferred to the concerned users. On the other hand, innovation, both technical and organizational, takes place on the ground, by the trial and error of practitioners trying to improve their practices or resolve problems. We thus distinguish between invention and innovation.

Invention is when something new is thought up by researchers in laboratories or on test plots or by farmers in their fields. Innovation is the implementation of a new combination of factors and is therefore already practice in action (Chauveau *et al*., 1999).

Working in partnership puts researchers in situations where they can study innovation as it happens and even accompany invention within emerging groups themselves. In doing so, they are in the best position to detect and encourage the faintest signs of nascent technical or organizational innovations which could become more prominent in time.

In uncertain situations, the knowledge of the concerned stakeholders and scientific knowledge should both be mobilized via the establishment of partnerships. This will help make decisions for resolving real problems, in given contexts and whose character is never just technical but always includes economic and political dimensions. Resulting innovations are largely dependent on socio-economic and politico-institutional contexts in which they were (co)constructed, and which a linear, descendant, or diffusionist approach would not allow (Akrich *et al.*, 1988).

Research in partnership

A partnership can be thought of as a set of connections between stakeholders for combining resources around a project that has been

designed together for attaining shared goals (adapted from Lindeperg, 1999).

This broad definition covers various types of partnerships, in particular depending on:
– The categories of stakeholders involved: physical or legal persons, public or private institutions, producer organizations, businesses, associations, territorial communities, State administrations, etc.;
– The shared objectives, for example, value generation (economic partnership), knowledge and innovation production (research partnership), acquisition of capacity of action (operational partnership), or inequality reduction (social partnership);
– The type of links that are created between the stakeholders: more or less formalized, contractualized, cooperative, institutional, politicized, voluntary, opportunistic, etc.;
– The shared resources, such as workforce, skills, knowledge, position in a social network, equipment, money;
– The mode of co-construction, for example, each stakeholder's place in the decision-making process (consultation, cooperation, co-decision, etc.), phase and type of the project concerned, methods to manage tensions and conflicts, or others.

The partnership therefore encompasses several realities. An ARP takes place when the following conditions are satisfied:
– It takes place between professional researchers and concerned actors or stakeholders and takes into consideration the knowledge of the citizens, of practitioners, or of users, their ability to generate knowledge, and the specific character of the researcher's profession;
– Its objectives are to act on the real world and produce together basic or applied knowledge in complex situations;
– It leads to relationships where stakeholders in different social and hierarchical institutional positions participate in the decision-making process thus becoming the authors of the action research, and not a relationship where stakeholders are just invited into a process decided upon without their participation (see Chapter 3, "Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach," page 41).

Amongst the many agricultural research approaches, the ARP is the one that lays emphasis on the willingness of researchers and other stakeholders to work together, to debate and negotiate common objectives, and to define an equitable framework for the relationships between all participants. It is therefore distinct from participatory research where farmers and other stakeholders are invited to "participate" in research

designed by others, without having any real power to influence choices and decisions, and where the diversity of viewpoints and interests is often underestimated (Lavigne Delville *et al.*, 2000).

Summary

The ARP approach is therefore part of a vast movement that is redrawing the relationships that researchers and other actors have with knowledge, power, and action. It calls into question the double delegation (Callon *et al.*, 2001) by which citizens, practitioners, and users delegate choices on issues that concern them to politicians on the one hand (via elections) and to experts (including researchers) on the other. Using some strong postulates, ARP recognizes and incorporates non-scientific knowledge, stimulates dialog between researchers and non-researchers on the same topics, and helps build the capacities of participants, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Knowledge is not always found where we expect it to be. Thus, "popular" or "local knowledge," technical knowledge, and institutional knowledge (found within organizations or produced via networks) are all diverse, rich, and dynamic. It is no longer the question of simple practices evolving as and when techniques and knowledge inspired from science are assimilated.

Innovation is a process where invention and its implementation are primarily the responsibility of the stakeholders concerned, who mobilize scientific and technical information in different ways (Bonneuil, 2004).

Researchers can no longer claim a monopoly of objectivity and knowledge. They cooperate with the other stakeholders in organized approaches for comparing analyses and for jointly creating new knowledge. Defining an issue (or constructing a problem-set) for all the stakeholders is therefore an essential step in the ARP approach.

ARP is thus an instrument to build stakeholders' individual and collective capacities. It allows them to adapt better to changing conditions, thanks to knowledge that they have learnt to mobilize and generate, to the new legitimacy that is conferred on them by participating in the research, and to the lessons learnt and experience gained in making decisions in complex situations.

By no means does this imply that all other forms of research are henceforth rendered futile or stand discredited. For specifically identified

themes, the conventional thematic agricultural research is irreplaceable for its essential contributions. The dissemination of research findings, even indirectly, can help widen the frame of reference in which the stakeholders perceive their situation, analyze the problems that confront them, and experiment with solutions.

Similarly, research concerns can be legitimate even without responding directly to an identified societal need. But because it starts with a negotiation of the research and its goals, ARP is *a priori* a more suitable response to stakeholder needs and has therefore a greater effectiveness.

Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

G. Faure, P. Gasselin, B. Triomphe,
L. Temple, H. Hocdé – SCIENTIFIC EDITORS

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) is a joint international institution of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States and the European Union (EU). Its mission is to advance food and nutritional security, increase prosperity and encourage sound natural resource management in ACP countries. It provides access to information and knowledge, facilitates policy dialogue and strengthens the capacity of agricultural and rural development institutions and communities. CTA operates under the framework of the Cotonou Agreement and is funded by the EU.
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Action research in partnership combines knowledge production, transformation of social realities and the building up of individual and collective skills. This book provides the foundation for understanding the theoretical background to action research in partnership in the field of agriculture and putting it into practice. The key intermediate steps and milestones of the approach are presented and discussed. The initial step – defining the problem and structuring the team that brings together all stakeholders – is crucial to the success of subsequent activities. The processes and methods that allow all stakeholders to be actively involved in the design, planning, monitoring and evaluation of results are described, as are those related to assessing the relevance of the results in terms of knowledge produced, capacity building of the actors or problem solving.

The book draws on a wide range of experiences in agriculture and rural development in developing countries, and especially in Africa and Latin America. Together, they illustrate how practitioners have responded to the challenges of implementing an approach that has to be tailored and fine-tuned to the specificities of each situation .

This book is intended for researchers and professionals working in the field of rural development. Representatives of rural and farmers' organizations in developing countries, often dealing with complex development challenges, will also find it useful.

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