Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach

Pierre Gasselin, Philippe Lavigne Delville

▶ **To cite this version:**

Pierre Gasselin, Philippe Lavigne Delville. Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach. Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world: action research in partnership, CTA LM Publishers, 224 p., 2014, 978-94-6022-345-7. hal-02798657

HAL Id: hal-02798657
https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02798657

Submitted on 5 Jun 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

3. Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach

P. Gasselin and P. Lavigne Delville

Action research in partnership (ARP) proposes a specific way of linking researchers to action via the mobilization of a group of stakeholders, researchers, and other actors. This linkage is based on the four criteria (Liu, 1992) mentioned in Chapter 1, "Action research in partnership:"

– A combination of a research intent (researchers) and a will to change (non-researchers);
– A dual objective of resolving users' problems and of advancing basic knowledge;
– A joint effort by researchers and other stakeholders;
– An ethical framework negotiated and accepted by all.

Six major principles stemming from these four criteria characterize the ARP approach. They are quickly outlined in this chapter before being explored in detail in the following ones. Major crises and possible derailments that can result during the implementation of an ARP are presented at the end of this chapter.

Incorporating research into action

As already pointed out in Chapter 1, "Action research: from its origins to the present" (page 23), real-world action is conducive to knowledge discovery and production. ARP involves itself with action by aiming for a balance between knowledge production, problem resolution, and learning. This approach creates a structure for the entire process and leads to the emergence of a collective actor who helps define the issue and the problem-set, controls and directs the activities, and evaluates and monitors the approach.

Producing contextualized knowledge

The aim of research is to produce rigorous knowledge which is generic to some extent. On the one hand, research is based on a dialog and

back-and-forth iterations between a theoretical framework and concepts considered relevant. This allows it to assess and describe complex realities. On the other hand, it relies on empirical analyses based on observations, experimentation, and surveys. This allows theories and concepts to be tested, and their scope and limitations to be determined, or even to be called into question.

To proceed, non-researchers not only require frameworks for analysis and general frames of reference, but also, and especially, precise knowledge concerning their environment and the processes at work in their own space.

The knowledge produced unites these two requirements. To be usable and useful to the stakeholders, it has to be local, contextualized, and has to be predominantly specific in nature. It frequently goes beyond the frontiers and categories of scientific disciplines to explain fully the multi-dimensional, complex processes.

However, it should also allow researchers to enrich general knowledge by extricating themselves from the specifics and particular contexts, and hence by going beyond the local and the empirical. The knowledge should thus gain a generic aspect and the researchers should be able to propose analyses with a wider validity.

Building together

ARP assumes that involved stakeholders (individuals and organizations) will participate throughout the whole research process (Darré, 1997): defining the general problem, formulating goals and research topics, undertaking the action research, reflecting and assessing the results. It is different from other research processes in which collaboration between researchers and other stakeholders is restricted to just one or more research stages with ARP that the concept of partnership finds its full expression.

All the participants are not only "stakeholders" but also "co-authors" of the process, its results, and its evaluation (Albaladejo and Casabianca, 1997). Chapter 6, "Enrolling stakeholders and the role of researchers" (page 79), examines the conditions propitious to the emergence of this collective.

The various partnership modalities (see Chapter 2, "Why undertake action research in partnership?" on page 31) refer to corresponding forms of participation in conducting an ARP. In a true partnership, it

is assumed that the different actors will share in the decision-making process. Similarly, it is assumed that risks, responsibilities, benefits, and access to resources will also be divided amongst the partners.

In such a scenario, the degree of involvement in the various stages often depends on the specific interest that the stakeholders have at a particular stage, the skills they can call upon, and other aspects.

Stakeholder participation in an ARP includes levels of involvement that can be very different. They are, in increasing degrees of involvement:
– Consultation using surveys and polls;
– Exchange of viewpoints;
– Building of a common vision (requiring a change in one's initial analysis);
– Distribution of activities amongst project partners;
– Sharing of responsibilities;
– Shared decision making, both for activities and their funding;
– Taking of initiatives (representing a real desire to be involved).

An ARP requires an equitable dialog between all stakeholders. However, a participant will not speak up or take responsibility as a planner of the ARP unless he or she finds some interest, has necessary resources and skills, and sufficient confidence in himself and his interlocutors.

Yet the different stakeholders are rarely on an equal footing at the launch of the process. Their ability to grasp the context, independently formulate a demand, or participate in negotiations are not the same (Albaladejo and Casabianca, 1995).

An ARP brings together categories of stakeholders with diverse interests and at various social and institutional positions. It operates in a social context which is always complex, with dynamic relationships of power, exclusion, and cooperation. Sometimes conflicts can even be openly perceived (Chauveau and Lavigne Delville, 1998). Asymetries between the stakeholders frequently prevent an open dialog and often skew the cooperation (see Chapter 7, "Introducing action research in partnership rooted: the Unai project in Brazil," page 97). Such is often the case, for example, in the asymmetries in technician-farmer relationships, caused primarily by an unequal mastery of the discourse.

These situations call for specific procedures (Barthélémy *et al*., 2007), covered in greater detail in Chapter 8, "Governance mechanisms," page 107, for constructing an environment in which power is more or

less in balance. Skills required to manage disparities and conflicts are indispensable for a real partnership. This is probably the most difficult aspect of managing an ARP.

Recognizing others' knowledge and developing a common language

The dialog between stakeholders requires the recognition of the validity and legitimacy of different knowledge types, irrespective of their origin or classification: profane, technical, scientific, institutional, etc. *A priori,* there is no hierarchical or dependent relationship between them. Stakeholder knowledge is no longer just an object for researchers to analyze but fuels the discussions and has relevance in arguments between different stakeholders and between stakeholders and researchers. Stakeholders contribute thus to the production of new knowledge, to the transformation of reality, and to learning processes. Specific procedures need to be called upon to promote this "dialog of knowledge" (see Chapter 9, "Operational mechanisms, methods, and tools," page 121).

Yet, at the beginning, each participant speaks a different language. The methods of reading reality, of defining issues, are different (Castellanet and Jordan, 2002). Adopting a common language thus seems to be essential for stakeholders to be able to reflect and act together. They will be able to build a common culture, their own collective identity, share a certain "real-world view," and be on the same page during their discussions.

Researchers and technicians in particular need to address these concerns. They have to make an effort to understand their interlocutors' thought processes and preoccupations. By avoiding unnecessarily complicated terms and terminology, they can render their own ideas and their concepts accessible to other stakeholders. Finally, they have to widen their interest beyond that of their own discipline. Building together a common representation of the complex situation that is the object of an ARP is a good way of favoring the emergence of a common language. Other practices, presented in Chapter 6, "Enrolling stakeholders and the role of researchers" (page 79), facilitate the dialog.

Adopting a framework of shared values

Because science and society are always interconnected, choices have to be made when implementing an ARP. Values and ethical principles have to be expressed plainly and each participant has to assume his or her social responsibility. Each partner has to share openly his or her cultural frames of reference, including those related to religion if deemed relevant, so that they can be combined and incorporated into a framework of shared values. This presupposes a collective understanding of the way different stakeholders perceive the world.

The framework will specify, for example:
– The values, attitudes, and behaviors that are allowed or forbidden within the ARP collective;
– The design of the collective's democratic mechanisms and their limits;
– The importance accorded to building the individual and collective capacities of those in marginalized groups (empowerment or autonomization;
– The minimum societal model which stakeholders adhere and aspire to (for example, the development of autonomous family farming contributing to the country's food security and sovereignty).

Even when the partnership has been formed mainly for technical reasons, the way adopted to structure participation into an ARP has a political dimension. Only when this framework of values is openly discussed can one hope to find answers to questions such as: How to ensure the relevance of the "choice" of participating groups, in terms of knowledge creation and societal change objectives? How to discern and analyze the roles, interests, and strategies of the various stakeholders when we cannot, or do not want to, undertake long sociological studies? Should the researcher hold back and let social differentiations be mirrored in the partnership? How should the facilitator tone down his or her own ideological positions? Can we organize an ARP with groups in conflict with each other? If yes, how? How to extend the benefits of an ARP to groups with little or no involvement in the approach?

Conducting an iterative process, based on reflexive analysis

An ARP cannot be preprogrammed: its first iterations often lead to changes in the initial framework or in the way the problem is

posed (Lavigne Delville *et al*., 2004). They raise new concerns to be addressed, which may necessitate new research or new experiments.

It is a matter therefore of an iterative process, whereby different research and action phases allow systematic testing of hypotheses, concepts, methods, and interpretations arrived at in earlier cycles, and consequently to refine or redefine them. Results of one stage contribute to fine-tune questions and help specify the contents of the next phase, its hypotheses, and modalities of action.

To this end, the different stakeholders should regularly analyze the process in progress. This reflexive analysis, conducted separately and together, is a constituent element of the approach. It invariably helps refine the problem-set and hypotheses, and contributes to changes (in postures, in social relationships). It also aids in steering the ARP process and evaluating it. Reflexive analysis helps assess the knowledge generated, lessons learnt, and the transformations of reality. Methods and tools to conduct such a reflexive analysis are presented in Part 4 (page 157).

The six principles are given concrete expression in an exacting approach which tries to find a balance between the various tensions presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Tensions in an action-research partnership and risks of derailment
N.E. Sellamna

The main tensions and possible causes of derailment of an action research in partnership (ARP) are:

Tension between two forms of instrumentalization. In the first form, everyone acts legitimately with one or more stakeholders using the partnership to mobilize skills and associated resources to study and resolve a given problem. The second, potentially destructive, consists of using the partners as pretexts to promote one's own projects, access funding, and pursue one's own political agenda.

Tension between relationships that are too individual and those that are too institutional. A partnership between individuals is easy to establish but has very limited possibilities to stimulate subsequent social change since it becomes necessary to mobilize organizations and institutions to do so. However, a partnership between institutions has "political" implications, going beyond the individuals involved. This raises the question of the co-existence of the freedom necessary to researchers and individuals engaged in an ARP and the specific institutional compulsions of the participating organizations.

...

...

Tension between two strategies, one whose objective is to obtain research findings and the other whose objective it is to obtain results for development. This strain is permanent and structural. It can be a source of conflict between the contrary expectations and priorities of the partners, especially so when they have very different profiles (mandates, cultural background, level of resources, planning time scales, etc.). The fear is that one strategy may overshadow another.

Tension between empiricism and conceptualization (see "Producing contextualized knowledge" on page 41). An action research starts with a problem confronting stakeholders, who do not have much regard for theories. And yet, for an issue originating in the field, participants should be particularly concerned about the concepts used. Research is not possible without concepts; they are a key to understanding situations and a basis for reflection. Concepts not only provide an interpretative lens on reality but also define the power relationships between the partners; those who master the concepts, master also the research.

Tension between engagement and detachment, the risk of paternalistic and fusionist approaches. "Engaged" professional researchers have both attitudes to a greater or lesser (latent) extent. Paternalism is, at its core, an expression of a power relationship which maintains, consciously or unconsciously, the partners in a dependent relationship under the guise of a comprehensive one. A fusionist attitude, on the other hand, deprives action research of the detachment required for the research and of the clash of viewpoints which lends richness to the partnership and can be its source of innovation.

Tension arising from the treatment of non-researcher partners as subjects or objects of the research. Unfortunately, acknowledging and respecting the identities of all partners is not a given. Professional researchers, in particular, often tend to consider the others as research subjects or research objects. In the first case, the researchers can have unrealistic expectations of their partners. In the second, the researchers treat their partners as one more element in their research and, thereby, lose sight of the latter's potential contributions to finding solutions.

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.
For more information on CTA, visit www.cta.int

CTA Postbox 380, 6700 AJ, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

LM Publishers
Velperbuitensingel 8
6828 CT Arnhem, The Netherlands
www.lmpublishers.nl
info@lmpublishers.nl

ISBN: 978 94 6022 345 5

© 2014 Quæ, CTA, Presses agronomiques de Gembloux
Original title: *Innover avec les acteurs du monde rural. La recherche-action en partenariat,* 2010

Éditions Quæ: RD 10, 78026 Versailles Cedex, France
Presses agronomiques de Gembloux, 2, Passage des Déportés,
5030 Gembloux, Belgium

Contents

Foreword
Philippe Lhoste 11

Preface
Ann Waters-Bayer and Niels Röling 13

Introduction 17

Part 1
Foundations of action research in partnership

1. Action research: from its origins to the present
N.-E. Sellamna 23
Origins of action research 24
Criticisms and evolution of action research 24
Action research in the development field 25
Action research in agriculture 26
Action research in all its forms 27
Action research in partnership 29

2. Why undertake action research in partnership?
P. Gasselin, P. Lavigne Delville 31
Main justifications 31
Research in partnership 36
Summary 38

3. Fundamental principles of an action research partnership approach
P. Gasselin,P. Lavigne Delville 41
Incorporating research into action 41
Producing contextualized knowledge 41
Building together 42
Recognizing others' knowledge and developing a common language . . 44
Adopting a framework of shared values 45
Conducting an iterative process, based on reflexive analysis 45

Box 1 - Tensions in an action-research partnership and risks of derailment – *N.E. Sellamna* 46

4. Important moments in an action research partnership

G. Faure 49

Temporal aspects. 49

Box 2. Different ways of designing the stages of an action research partnership 50

The launch phase 52

Box 3. Diagnostic tools 52

The resolution phase 56

The disengagement phase 60

An unpredictable course 61

Conclusion. 65

Part 2
First steps to an action research in partnership

5. Emergence of the collective

P. Pédelahore, C. Castellanet 69

Contours of the initial collective 69

Criteria for selecting members of the collective 71

First steps of the collective. 75

6. Enrolling stakeholders and the role of researchers

C. Castellanet, P. Pédelahore 79

Enrolling stakeholders and building trust 79

Box 4. Farmer-researcher roundtables: simple exchanges or true debates? – B. Sogoba, M. Togo, H. Hocdé 81

Box 5. Building trust by being put to the test – H. Hocdé 82

Box 6. A farmer university in north-east Brazil for co-constructing knowledge – J.-P. Tonneau, E. Coudel 86

Managing tensions 87

Role of researchers. 89

Box 7. Malagasy farmers question researchers: Who are you? – H. Hocdé . . 92

Box 8. Managing relations between between ARP researchers and their institutions – B. Triomphe 95

7. Introducing action research rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil
É. Sabourin, B. Triomphe, H. Hocdé, J.H. Valadares Xavier, M. Nascimento de Oliveira 97
Context and issues 97
Stakeholders and the origin of the approach 98
Reflections on the degree and type of involvement 98
Activities conducted as part of action research in partnership 100
Some results 101
Summary 102

Conclusion 104

Part 3
Making action research in partnership work

8. Governance mechanisms
*H. Hocdé, G. Faur*e 107
From stakeholder coordination to governance 107
Defining an ethical framework 108
Box 9. An example of ethical commitment – M. Dulcire 109
Box 10. Material transfer agreement between Sintraf and Embrapa – A. Toledo Machado 109
Constructing decision-making mechanisms 110
Diversity of governance mechanisms 111
Operational rules 115
Box 11. An example of a work charter: the Innobap project – B. Lokossou, M. Lama, K. Tomekpe, C. Ngnigone, J. Lançon, H. Hocdé. . 116
Summary 119

9. Operational mechanisms, methods, and tools
G. Faure, H. Hocdé 121
No recipes, only an approach 121
Some definitions 122
Understanding tools, methods, and operational mechanisms in context 123
Box 12. The "Superación" farmer-experimenter local committee – I. Cifuentes, D. Molineros, H. Hocdé 124
Box 13. Assistance to local communities and the land-use plan in Senegal – P. d'Aquino 126

Box 14. Role playing for managing village lands 128
Lessons learnt from the tools used 128
Selecting, using, and adapting tools 130

10. Managing collectives
H. Hocdé, G. Faure 133
Managing communications 133
Box 15. Communications surprise! – M. Vaksmann 134
Leadership and mediation functions 135
Box 16. Organizing a presentation of results 137
Box 17. Preparing for a farmers' visit – B. Miranda Abaunza, H. Hocdé. . . . 139
Monitoring and understanding action research in partnership as it takes place 140
Summary 141

11. Establishing relationships: the Teria project in Burkina Faso
É. Vall, I. Bayala 143
Context and issues 143
Conducting experiments and the role of governance authorities 145
Impact of involving farmers in the decision-making process 149
Summary 150

Conclusion 152

Part 4
Results and monitoring/evaluation

12. Chacterizing results of action research in partnership
L. Temple, F. Casabianca, M. Kwa 157
Hypotheses that shape the results 157
Creating new knowledge 159
Box 18. Creating specifications for marketing pork in northern Vietnam – T.B. Vu 159
Reformulating and updating research questions 163
Box 19. Formulation of a research program based on the results of action research in partnership – C. de Sainte Marie, F. Casabianca. 164
Answers to stakeholder questions 164

Box 20. Technical innovations for plantain producers in central Cameroon – L. Temple, M. Kwa 166
Box 21. Institutional innovation – L. Temple, M. Kwa 166
Building individual and collective capacities 167

13. Monitoring and evaluation
L. Temple, F. Casabianca et M. Kwa 169
Can the results of action research in partnership be measured? 169
Box 22. Characterization of a hybrid variety – L. Temple 170
Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating results 172
Monitoring and evaluation tools 174
Box 23. The survey mechanism for a participatory monitoring and evaluation exercise in central Cameroon – L. Temple, M. Kwa 176
Summary 175

Conclusion 177

Part 5
Operational considerations

14. Training for action research in partnership: strategies, content, and modalities
B. Triomphe, H. Hocdé 181
General training strategy 181
Pedagogical modalities 185
Box 24. Diversity of personal profiles that an ARP training has to accommodate 187
Box 25. Role of participants in a diagnosis within the Unai project in Brazil. 188
Structuring the initial training 189
Box 26. Two examples of initial training in action research in partnership. . . 191
Structuring the ongoing training 191
Box 27. Key principles and attitudes for conducting reflexivity 195

15. Funding action research in partnership: strategies and practices
B. Triomphe, H. Hocdé 197
Specific expenses that should be considered 197
Box 28. The headache of daily allowances and other compensations 198

Constructing a multi-source funding strategy 199

Conclusion 203

General conclusion 205
Main lessons 205
Part 1. Foundations of action research in partnership 205
Part 2. First steps to action research in partnership 206
Part 3. Making action research in partnership work 207
Part 4. Results and monitoring/evaluation 208
Part 5. Operational considerations 208
Unresolved questions and perspectives 209
Glossary 211
Bibliography 215
List of authors 219
Index 221

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.

About the authors:

Guy Faure, economist at CIRAD, conducts research on supporting producers and producer organizations through partnerships in Africa and Latin America.

Pierre Gasselin, agronomist and geographer at INRA, conducts research in Latin America and France in situations of pluriactivity and sectoral or regional crises.

Bernard Triomphe, agronomist at CIRAD, focuses on interfacing technogical change with innovation processes and systems, in Latin America and Africa.

Ludovic Temple, economist at CIRAD, focuses his research on institutional and organizational determinants of technological change in food chains, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Henri Hocdé, system agronomist at CIRAD has dedicated many years to building up farmers' capacity for innovation in Latin America and Africa.

CTA

LM PUBLISHERS

ISBN 978-94-6022-345-7

225

9 789460 223457 >