3. Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach

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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 under-standing 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 collec-tive 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 con-tributing to the country's food security and sovereignty).

Even when the partnership has been formed mainly for technical rea-sons, the way adopted to structure participation into an ARP has a polit-ical 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
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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.

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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.
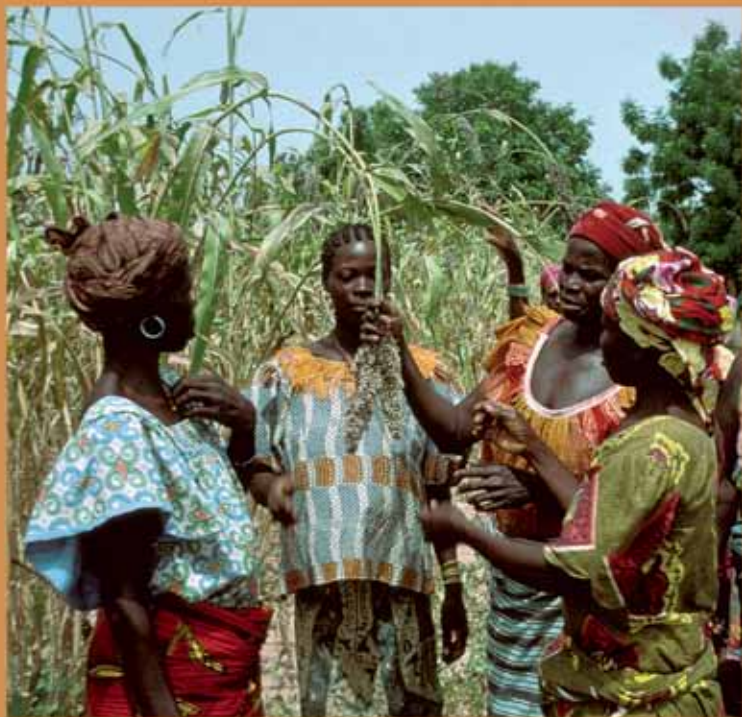
Tension arising from the treatment of non-researcher partners as subjects or objects of the research. Unfortunately, acknowledging and respecting the identities of all partners is not a given. Professional researchers, in particular, often tend to consider the others as research subjects or research 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.

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