

When is Action Research Participatory?

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Action research is increasingly being used in a variety of different contexts, including rural development, organisational change and natural resource management. Increasingly it is recognised, if sometimes grudgingly, as a legitimate approach to research. Associated with this welcome trend is the tendency to label all action research as Participatory Action Research (PAR). The problem is that the notion of participation has become very blurred and the adjective “participatory” is often quite meaningless. My aim here is to explore some aspects of participation in the context of action research.

I suggest that it is useful to make a clear distinction between action research in general and PAR as a subtype of action research. Where this gets a little bit difficult is that some proponents of action research see participation as an essential element in any action research. This is the position advocated by Deakin University action research group (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

There is a consensus that action research involves a group of people involved in an iterative process of action and learning. The process is usually seen as being cyclical. However, meaningful participation (in PAR) involves more than a group of researchers working through such cycles together. It also implies an involvement of the “subjects” (or stakeholders) as researchers themselves. I would suggest that a process in which a group of researchers and associates go through a collaborative learning process to improve their interactions with a forest user group, but without the involvement of the user group itself in the reflective cycles, can usefully be thought of as action research. But it is a distortion to lump it together with a process in which a wider group of actors jointly runs the whole process (PAR).

The suggestion that the term Participatory Action Research should be limited to cases where there is a significant level of participation by actors beyond the facilitators and researchers is based on two points.

Firstly, assuming all action research must be “participatory” tends to devalue the potential application of action research in the form of reflective learning/action cycles by a small group of researchers. Yet, this type of action research can be appropriate in some circumstances. I would argue, for example, that the action research in the ACM Project seemed mostly to have involved the ACM research teams. The participation of a wider group of stakeholders was part of the ACM process that was being “studied”, not, as far as I can see, as part of the action research process itself. Clearly the action research has been productive and it is difficult to see what participation by stakeholders in the research process would have added to the project. The real value of participation was in the ACM process.

Secondly, blurring AR and PAR invites tokenism, in which any involvement by the wider stakeholders is labeled participation. (In the case of Participatory Rural Appraisal, simply interviewing rural people is sometimes seen as being

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“participation”. This is, of course, absurd, but this sort of tokenism does occur frequently.) In terms of Arnstein’s ladder of citizen’s participation, real participation (as opposed to tokenism) involves empowerment in the form of decision-making (Arnstein 1976).

There are many different modes of stakeholder participation in action research. These include: ownership and identification of the research issue (“problematic situation”); participation in data collection; and participation in the process of evaluating actions and planning action cycles (that is participating in the reflection, but not necessarily the action). This last type seems closest to the notion of stakeholder participation in decision-making identified by Arnstein as the most serious form of participation. It makes some sense to restrict the use of the term PAR to situations where the stakeholders participate in managing the research process (the action and learning cycles).

This still leaves a number of questions about the participatory element in PAR. Some of these relate to the boundaries of participation. Part of the rationale for participation by stakeholders in action research is an ethical concern that people affected by research should be actors in the research, not just the objects of study. In research where the potential effects reach to a large community, how can boundaries be established? Should all people in the community be participants? If a smaller group is selected or volunteers to “represent” community interests, where does their legitimacy come from?

It is easy to get tied up in endless debates about whether research was or was not “really” participatory. Perhaps the question is not so much about being pedantic about definitions, but about the need to specify just what sort of participation occurred and just who was involved.

References

Arnstein, Sherry R. (1960) A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol 35: 216-224.

Kemmis, Stephen and Robin McTaggart (eds) (1988) *The Action Research Planner*. Deakin University, Australia: Deakin University Press. (3rd edition).