

# Contextualizing Action Research

Emmanuel Adugu, University of the West Indies, Barbados

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on designing and conducting action research in diverse settings. Action research is a collaborative approach to problem solving. It involves consultative problem identification, reflects context, encourages reflexive examination, and ultimately encourages and empowers beneficiaries for desirable change. In that regard, it puts all stakeholders at the core of the change process. The process of change from research project conceptualization to analysis and policy implications is thus made more understandable and meaningful to community actors (beneficiaries). The chapter features three empirical models from diverse parts of the world. These are Model 1: Photo-voice as a form action research depicting an underused footbridge in Barbados; Model 2: DANIDA Community Water and Sanitation Project, Ghana; and REACH After School Enrichment Program, USA.

## KEYWORDS

Action Research, Change Process, Model, Outcome, Participation, Planning, Puzzlement

## INTRODUCTION

There are different levels that people participate in research that seeks to understand problems facing them in their communities. In that context, the ultimate goal of the research is to generate relevant knowledge to change the dynamics of their livelihood systems from “what is” to “what it ought” to be. Usually, ordinary people participate in research by answering questions posed by “extractive researchers” using questionnaire surveys, or similar approaches to elicit responses. In such cases, the respondents (people who are supposed to be the intended beneficiaries) do not have the opportunity to influence the outcome of the research, as findings are not shared with the respondents, nor is there any opportunity for the people interviewed to check the accuracy of researcher’s findings. In other cases, people’s participation in research may be interactive. In such contexts, people participate in joint analysis of the research problem—this approach actively seeks multiple perspectives and leads to action plans, empowerment of local people, local control and ownership of research outcomes.

The level of participation of people in any research is shaped by how the researcher(s) perceive the reality of people’s problems. Essentially, there are researchers who “erroneously” believe that their perception of the research problem and its diagnosis is an accurate assessment of the situation. In addition to that, such researchers “erroneously” believe that they possess the requisite knowledge and skills to solve the problem in a particular context. For such researchers, their perception of the problem is “more correct” than that of the masses they desire to help. Unfortunately, this attitude of expert “knows-it-all” is carried over from education and training. This calls for change—there is the need for active involvement of people who are conceived to be beneficiaries of any research project.

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As a result of attitudes of superior knowledge and often bias on the part of researchers, the people they serve with their research do not have the opportunity to participate in the formulation of the research problems and strategies for addressing them. When people participate actively in researches that are conceived to improve the livelihood systems, the chances of undesirable social costs will be lower and hence successful outcomes.

The main objective of this article is to provide the reader with the knowledge and skills for designing and conducting action research in diverse settings. The article is organized into seven distinct but interrelated parts. The first part examines conceptualization of action research as a means of knowledge generation. This is followed by action research cycle. Action research cannot be effectively conducted without a good grasp of community participation. For that reason, the third part of the article links action research to the concepts of participation and community. Subsequently, features of participation; and essential factors for conducting action research are discussed. In order to adequately equip the reader to design and conduct action research, the last two parts of the article present empirical models of conducting action research; and a summary of core issues.

## CONCEPTUALIZING ACTION RESEARCH

The ultimate purpose of any social science research is to create new knowledge for assisting people in taking informed decisions with respect to their livelihood systems such as food and environment, human interaction with the built environment, and other factors that critically impinge upon their quality of life. In that context, action research aims at changing the dynamics of people's livelihood systems from "what is" to a desirable one—to improve upon their quality of life. Action research is a systematic investigative process with the ultimate goal of solving an immediate problem or improving practices.

Kurt Lewin is generally credited for coining the concept of action research. Lewin (1946) described action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action, observation and the evaluation of the action. In practice, action research begins with an imperfectly understood felt concern and a desire to take action, suggesting some kind of improvement or change is desirable (McTaggart, 1994, p. 316). It aims at changing practitioners' practices, their understanding of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice (Kemmis, 2009). In that respect, practical knowledge is created in a localized context. The goal of action research as Toulmin (1996) aptly put it, is to improve practice:

*The goal of action research is to improve, not our theories, as in physics or molecular biology, but our practices, as in medicine and engineering. Its interest lies not in abstract conceptual systems, as in mathematics but in local timely knowledge of concrete situations, as in cultural anthropology. (Toulmin, 1996, p. 58)*

In essence, practical knowledge is created in a localized context—to change the dynamics of the system from "what is" to a desirable one.

There are many conceptualizations of action research by scholars. For Dickson (2000a; 2000b), it is an inquiry by ordinary people acting as researchers to explore questions in their daily lives, to recognize their own resources, and to produce knowledge and take action to overcome inequities, often in solidarity with external supporters, who are considered as change agents or more precisely, facilitators. Gormley (2001) views action research as a form of investigation where subjugated people work together with research facilitator(s) to gather information and implement solutions to problems in their community. In that regard, action research is about enhancing the capacity of human beings to complement or support each other's learning. It is a systematic enquiry involving all participants.

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