Participatory action-research, developed primarily by peoples of the Third World, combines adult education with investigation and sociopolitical action. With the goal of personal and social transformation it builds on the capacity of people to think and work together for a better life and the equitable sharing of knowledge, skills and resources so as to support fair social structures, which, ultimately, are health determinants.

Participatory action-research was developed primarily by people of the Third World when traditional Western approaches failed to induce beneficial social and economic change (1). It concerns movement from the present reality to a potential reality in the future. The following principles are observed:

- people have the capacity to think and work together for a better life;
- knowledge, skills and resources should be shared so as to support fair distribution and structures.

Through personal and social transformation, participatory action-research works towards the liberation of oppressed people. The development of a critical consciousness enables groups to examine their reality in order to change unjust social, economic and decision-making structures (2).

A wise peasant in the mountains of Tepoztlan, Mexico, once asked me if I knew how to work the land. I did not. He asked me about other farming skills, none of which I possessed. He concluded that, although highly educated, I was very ignorant, just as he was in his way. He offered to teach me how to work the land, and I agreed.

(arturo ornelas)

Recognizing almost all action as political, participatory action-research assumes that work has implications for the distribution of power in society (3) and that control of the production of knowledge is central to the maintenance of power (4). Attempts to upset the status quo and introduce more democratic procedures necessitate active involvement in the distribution of power, relationships between social groups, and the production of knowledge.

No research is neutral, devoid of a value base. Research is undertaken as a consequence of value judgements and
Some peasants in the Tepoztlan mountains told me they needed drinking water and asked for help to write to the government. There was plenty of water in the area but they could not take it because the land belonged to a wealthy man who refused to allow them to do so. Yet the peasants had worked the land for thousands of years, and an examination of the titles to it showed that they had every right to take water. The people confronted the wealthy man and his armed servants, and, led by an old woman with a pick, began constructing a water supply system for themselves. Eventually the wealthy man accepted the new situation with a good grace.

(Arturo Ornelas)

political assumptions and decisions, and this is reflected in the types of problem examined, the methodologies used, the dissemination of findings, and the sources and amounts of funding.

Knowledge is produced in many ways, and research is not the exclusive domain of highly trained scientists: valid research can be conducted by ordinary people in everyday circumstances. Indeed, grass-roots science can help to give people a historical perspective, showing them where they have come from, where they are, where they want to go and how to get there.

From perception to transformation

Participatory action-research begins with a feeling among a group of people about a problem. Thought, understanding, action and transformation follow. Changes happen not because people become more informed, but because their need induces transformation. Once a process begins as a result of need, learning is set in motion.

The essence of the approach is collective reflection and action. Groups of people think and work together in three learning cycles: education and analysis, investigation, and action. Participation helps those involved to understand their realities more clearly and to work for improvement.

In the education and analysis cycle the nature of the situation confronted is defined:

- What is the problem?
- How do people feel about the problem or need?
- What is the context and what are the consequences?
- What are the causes?
- Who says so?
- What could be achieved?
- What has to be learnt?

I was asked to find out why peasants living at Lake Titicaca were not planting wheat, even though they had all the necessary seeds and equipment. A peasant explained that they were expecting little rain, because ducks were nesting close to the shore, a sure sign that the level of the lake was not going to rise. The previous year the people had planted wheat as a donor agency had asked, under similar conditions, and most of their work had been wasted.

(Arturo Ornelas)
The investigation cycle may ask:

- What other information is needed?
- Why?
- Who says so?
- How can more information be obtained?
- What are the risks?
- What new skills are needed in order to succeed?
- What does the new information mean?

Taking action means working for change:

- What can be done about the problem?
- How, when and where can action be taken?
- What are the obstacles to action?
- Who will do what?
- Who will benefit?
- What are the risks?
- What are the criteria of successful action?
- What new problems will be created?
- How can this new knowledge be shared with others?

Clearly, the various processes are linked. One may picture reflection and action as alternating in the foreground and background. As one process is emphasized, the other is temporarily in the background. Reflection on its own leads to informed passivity; action on its own brings sporadic, sometimes chaotic results, with the threat of authoritarian control over decision-making. Participatory action-research is a marriage of reflection and informed action, leading to a new reality. Theory and practice are integrated, each giving rise to the other in an evolving “praxis”, with the knowledge base being continuously expanded.

In a small town in Tepoztlán, Mexico, a group of young men and I were talking about the weather, the mountains and other general matters. Gradually we built a bond of mutual confidence and trust, and they told me about the needs of their community: jobs, roads, water, transport, shelter to protect people from the sun and rain as they waited for the bus to arrive. We discussed what was feasible, and after many meetings they said that the shelter was the only possibility. Three months later they had worked out how to proceed. We went in my car to see various officials and completed the legal transactions. Within ten days a substantial bus shelter had been erected, the culmination of a process lasting several months, during which the young men had organized their minds, found the necessary resources, gained confidence, and acted.

(Arturo Ornelas)

Each group of participants develops its own learning cycles. The experiences of individuals within a group and during a cycle will vary. The methodologies are dynamic and flexible; the process of transformation never ends, allowing responsiveness to particular situations and people. However, the learning cycles share certain characteristics:

- they work towards liberation (equitable communities and societies with justice, freedom and ecological balance);
- they are dynamic (organic, perpetually changing, non-linear, open, continuous processes without time limits), interactive and unique (people move between cycles, sometimes jumping a cycle, sometimes repeating one several times before moving on);
they build on what people know and believe (by using people’s present reality as a starting point and repeatedly extending into the future), and seek historical guidance;

The search for alternative ways of living, organizing and interacting continues as the seriousness of human and ecological damage is recognized.

- they are collective and essentially practical (communities working on issues about which they have strong feelings, with researchers or animators from outside who are full members of the participatory action-research group);
- they are process-orientated (how something is done or discussed is as important as what is being done or discussed);
- they produce new knowledge (new, deeper understanding is systematically sought, using multiple means for knowledge generation and documentation, with problem-posing situations and problem-solving processes).

Community action for development

In participatory action-research, individuals with common concerns form groups in order to achieve specific goals. It is vital to have continual dialogue in a climate of mutual trust, openness and cooperation. So long as a group remains intact, notwithstanding changes in individual participation, the process can continue. Continuing participation induces the growth of self- and group awareness.

The creation of a sense of community among the participants is essential. The building and maintenance of a partnership requires a range of important questions to be answered. Who are we? Why are we here? What do we believe? How can we work together? And so on. The evolving combination of mutual support and questioning and the organization of joint action promote the “awakening” nature of participatory action-research. The figure outlines how the approach works.

Oppression and deprivation bring powerlessness, vulnerability, isolation, poverty and physical weakness (8). In a liberating situation, people may develop competence provided that they have:

- correct information and an understanding of its meaning;
- adequate skills, including those necessary for the performance of tasks in the fields of communication, organization, planning and group activity;
- participation in decision-making, together with the means to change what is undesirable and maintain the desirable;
- critical analysis of situations, such that the consequences of actions can be anticipated;
- confidence and resources in sufficient measure to permit action to be taken (6).

These tightly interlocking factors, vital to the building of competence, also provide essential support for development. Development is a capacity-building process in which people become aware of achievable individual and collective life-styles and move towards an improved quality of life (7). It involves political, economic and social change, not necessarily with economic growth, and flourishes in communities with humane, just and viable characteristics.
The process of participatory action-research.

People-centred development requires mutual self-help and seeks to broaden political and economic participation.

There is a dynamic relationship between people-centred development and participatory action-research. Neither is complete without the other. Participatory action-research moves communities to become more developed, more human, and helps them to grow in confidence and enter new learning cycles.

Serious personal risk may attach to participatory action-research, which, particularly under repressive governments, may lead to loss of employment, position and support systems. To challenge dominant modes of thinking and organization may even result in loss of life. However, many people have come to the conclusion that the potential benefits outweigh the risks.

As with all approaches to change, participatory action-research has inner tensions. The complexities of maintaining group cohesiveness, collectively defining priority problems, and carrying out feasible investigations and actions should not be underestimated. Issues such as those of determining appropriate roles for external researchers and devising suitable evaluation processes continue to require study. However, local adaptation is the key, and there is no point in waiting for the broad approach to reach some imagined state of perfection: the challenge is to share what is known and begin at the earliest possible moment.

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The search for alternative ways of living, organizing and interacting continues as the seriousness of human and ecological damage is recognized. People should not be mere objects of research and development programmes. Evolving from groups of people marginalized by current global and local systems, participatory action-research shares a value base with people-centred development, acknowledges the validity and importance of people's knowledge, and works to build competence and health in
individuals and communities. An awareness is beginning of the potential of this approach in health research and development.

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References


Training teachers for health education

Teacher training, both pre-service and in-service, is one of the major factors in a successful school health education programme. Education and training to inspire and equip teachers with knowledge and skills to make a curriculum exciting is essential. Such training should also include activities to promote the teachers’ own positive health behaviours to enhance their role as models. Ongoing support to teachers and monitoring of performance is necessary for quality teaching, as is granting teachers of health education equal status to that of teachers of academic subjects.

Teacher training institutions have a critical role to play in such functions as the preparation of teachers for health education, providing technical support to schools, and promoting research and evaluation of school health programmes.

– Comprehensive school health education.
Suggested guidelines for action.
Geneva, World Health Organization, 1992