An brief introduction to action research – key concepts and practice

SWITCH LA training – 26th Jan 2007

Dr. Patrick Moriarty (IRC)
Presentation contents

- Background and concepts
- Main steps
- Challenges and risks
- Action research in EMPOWERS
What is action research?

- Learning by doing
- Collaborative learning
- Research carried out by practitioners **supported by** researchers
- Research in the real world

Why action research?

- Real world problems require real world solutions – these are difficult to identify/test in ‘scientific settings’
- People are more likely to own (and apply) new ideas that they have helped to develop themselves
- Scientific method can support and improve decision making and choice of solutions
Where does it come from?

- Social science research
- Reaction to positivism – assumes that ‘truth’ is a social construct; that social systems (like water management) are social constructs
- Assumes that to understand how a given ‘intervention’ (hardware or software) it is necessary to make the intervention and observe the results

Action research as a concept is closely related to adaptive management and implies a change in how people act and relate to each other
How to do action research – the action research process

Lesson one – there is no blueprint. Action research is about a group of people deciding to investigate something (a problem – a new process) together

There are conditions

- Openness
- Willingness to be wrong
- Willingness to be seen to be ignorant
- Desire for change/improvement (among at least some stakeholders!)
There are some typical steps – often represented as a cycle

1. **Act**
   - Stakeholders implement their plan (or steps within their plan)

2. **Observe**
   - Stakeholders observe the impacts of their activities. Are they as expected? If not why?

3. **Reflect**
   - Stakeholders analyse ‘situation’ – identify solution(s), plan how to approach their research

4. **Plan**
   - Stakeholders reassess their objectives in the light of observations, and re-formulate plans for the next phase
Key elements of action research

◆ Clarity of visions/objectives (what change do we seek to achieve?)
◆ Clarity of baseline, and indicators of change (how will we measure the change?)
◆ Documentation and frequent dissemination (how will we communicate our findings?)
  ▪ Short cycle dissemination is essential to feed the process
Elements of action research used at several different levels

- Overall, in developing a methodology for participatory strategic planning of WASH and WRM that:
  - Was locally owned and relevant
  - Applicable and scalable within local constraints

- Within the methodology, elements were used for:
  - Problem identification and analysis by water users and other stakeholders
    - PRA, PTD, ........
Lessons learned

- There is no blueprint/hard-and-fast rules for action research – it is an approach or philosophy
- Not everyone will engage to the same level at the same time
- Because action research implies change, there will be (institutional and individual) drivers and resistors – they may change over time
- Learning to say ‘I don’t know’ can be difficult/challenging
- Action research is very challenging – personally and emotionally – particularly for those initiating/facilitating the process
- Providing time and money for documentation and reflection is essential
  - Many people are more comfortable ‘acting’ than ‘reflecting’
  - Provide space for frequent reflection (every three-six months)
Exercise

- Split into three groups
- Each group will have at least one resource person from EMPOWERS
- You may ask ONE question of the resource person
- They will document your answer on flip-chart paper
- After 10 minutes move to another group