



Learning Alliance Briefing Note 4: A brief introduction to action research concepts and practice (DRAFT)

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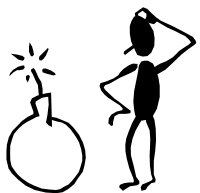
Introduction

This briefing note is intended as a primer on action research for participants in the SWITCH programme, particularly those involved in the facilitation and support of Learning Alliances. It is based in large part on an excellent summary by Rory O'Brien (1998), and is illustrated based on the author's own experiences undertaking action research especially within the context of the EMPOWERS programme on improved local water governance in the MENA region (www.empowers.info). The objective of the note is to demystify action research, and to present it as a straightforward and common sense approach for researchers and practitioners to work together to find solutions to real-world problems.

Background and concepts

What is action research?

Action research goes under several names including learning by doing and collaborative learning. In essence all these names intend to illustrate two fundamental points about action research. Firstly, that it is research carried out by practitioners (undertaking actions) supported by researchers (who help to analyse and document that actions). Secondly that it takes place within the 'real world' as opposed to a laboratory, computer or university.



Of course, in practice it is not quite as simple as that. There is room for more academic approaches (such as modelling to help identify potential courses of action), just as there is sometimes room for action with little research element. But the underlying concept of coordinated and mutually supporting activities between researchers and 'actors' is central to action research.

Why use action research?

The aim of action research is to make both 'action' and 'research' more effective in the overarching aim of supporting positive innovation. In the case of the SWITCH project, innovation in how water and water-

related services are managed in urban areas. Real world problems require real world solutions, which are often difficult to identify or test in academic or scientific settings. For example, demand management makes lots of sense when represented as percentage reductions in water use within models – but is very difficult to implement in practice.

People are more likely to own and apply new ideas that they have helped to develop themselves. The reality is that the people who read the academic literature tend to be other academics, not policy makers or practitioners. To get policy makers (and managers and engineers) to adopt new ways of thinking means engaging with those stakeholders and helping them to find better ways of doing their work. In this, the scientific method can provide invaluable support in helping to choose between multiple different competing courses of action, as well as in assessing and feeding back into decision making the results of monitoring and analysis.

Where does it come from?

The roots of action research can be traced to many different places. Certainly a strong element comes from social science research, and a reaction to (misplaced) efforts to use positivist 'hard science' approaches in hugely complex societal issues. Taken at its most extreme this social constructivist approach supposes that all 'truth' is a social construct – and therefore the effort of science to be 'objective' is bound to fail (the researcher is inextricably linked to, and therefore interacts with, the 'system' they wish to study).

More pragmatically, some of the strongest experiences of action research come from areas such as agricultural research and extension and education, where there is a strong political and social element that must be taken into account if one is to understand how a given intervention is to work. In this pragmatic approach, a key assumption of action research is that to understand how a given intervention (hardware or software) will impact on a system it is necessary to first make the intervention, and then observe the results.

In this pragmatic guise, action research is also closely related to adaptive management (itself rooted in ecological concepts and thinking) and implies a change in how managers (and other stakeholders) within complex systems act and relate to each other and the system itself. The essence of adaptive management is that complex systems are too complex for it ever to be possible to analyse them fully, and hence rational decision making approaches (such as optimisation) are bound to fail. The only way to make progress is to adopt a process of constant action followed by adaptation in the face of system reaction.

How to do action research – the action research process

There are no blueprints

Action research is more of a philosophy – a way about thinking about the relationship between research, action and impact – than a hard-and-fast set of activities. As

such there is no blueprint for doing action research, although there is reasonably good agreement on a number of key steps. These are summarized below. On the one hand it is a very simple concept: actors working together with researchers. On the other hand, its practical application is complex, calling for a mix of experience and a certain way of looking at the world, best described as a mix of flexibility and rigour.

This said, there are a number of conditions, without which action research will not be possible:

- Perhaps the single most important element required for action research to succeed is a desire for change or improvement among at least some stakeholders. Openness is required on behalf of all parties to new ideas, to challenging themselves, to trying things in different ways. Only when people realise that 'business as usual' is not working is the space created to try new approaches. And only when the desire for change is strong and personally motivated will resistance to change be overcome.
- Related to above, a willingness to be (and seen to be) wrong is critical. Without a willingness to take risks and make mistakes there can be no progress. The danger of action research is that the spotlight of research interest can make people nervous about the implications of being wrong. Equally, researchers faced with the responsibility of actually having real-world action and expense based on their ideas may become overcome with previously inexperienced shyness!
- For people who often find themselves in a position of leadership – senior managers, engineers, researchers, politicians - willingness to admit they don't know the answer can also pose problems. Standing up in front of a group of people (peers, seniors and juniors) and saying 'we have a problem, I'm not sure about the solution, but if we work together we may be able to find one' takes courage and leadership.

The action research cycle

Having said that there is no blueprint for action research, there are nevertheless some typical steps or elements that can be identified. These are often represented as a cycle (Figure 1). In this case the cycle is shown as having four main steps, although there can be up to six (see the examples cited in O'Brien, 1998). However, these four illustrate well the main components and concepts of action research, which should in any case not be approached in an overly inflexible manner:



- **Plan:** Based on an analysis of their situation (undertaken in the 'reflect' step) stakeholders identify a vision or objectives for their work. Based in turn on these objectives they identify and prioritise actions and plan to implement them as

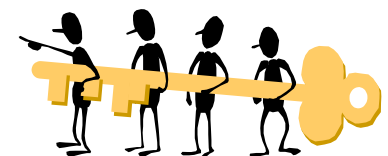
part of their research. The terms vision and objectives are used here rather than the sometimes more common 'problems' because purely problem based approaches can often lead to an overly narrow approach to identifying action. A more positive 'vision' based approach to analysis can offer a more useful starting point.

- **Act:** Stakeholders implement the identified and prioritised actions of the planning step. The quality with which actions are implemented is very important, as it is the usefulness of the action – rather than whether it has been done well or badly – that is the subject of the research. Poorly implemented actions can lead to negative results that while having little to do with the validity of the underlying approach can lead stakeholders to turn away from it.
- **Observe:** Stakeholders observe the impacts of their activities based on monitoring and analysis. This step is where the support of researchers and research methods are critical. An ability to provide a rigorous framework for measuring the impact of the action (as well as its costs) is essential. Are the results as expected? If not, why not?
- **Reflect:** Stakeholders reassess their objectives in the light of observations, and re-formulate plans for the next phase

The 'cycle' can of course start at any of these steps, although it is most typically thought of as starting with either reflection or planning. More importantly than where to start is the length of each iteration. Ideally there should be more than one full cycle within an action research process allowing for several steps of identification, implementation, and eventual refinements. Experience shows that periods for reflection (typically workshops or meetings) should take place on a regular basis – for example every few months. The danger of lengthening this cycle is that those involved become locked into the 'action' part of their work and forget about the 'research'. Taking 'time-out' from the action is therefore itself a very powerful tool for learning. Ensuring suitably short periods of action followed by reflection may mean breaking a larger process down into a number of sub-processes.

Key elements of action research

A number of elements are particularly important in implementing action research. These include:



- **Clarity of visions/objectives.** It is essential that the group undertaking action research are reasonably clear about their objectives. This does not mean that they have to be clear at the outset on how they intend to achieve the vision or objectives. That is what the research is about. But they do have to be

clear where they want the research to take them: what is the problem to be solved; what is the vision to be achieved? Establishing this baseline is an important part of the reflecting and or planning steps.

- *Clarity of baseline, and indicators of change.* It is equally essential, if the research is to yield maximum benefits, to be clear on the baseline of important indicators for desired change. That is, what are the elements of the system that action research is intended to change? What important intervening factors may also exist? And what possible external factors may either have an impact upon, or be impacted by the activities being researched (externalities)? It is identifying and monitoring these indicators that lies at the heart of a successful observation and allows change to be measured.
- *Documentation and frequent dissemination.* The objective of research informing action can be let down if there is poor communication of results and findings to stakeholders (within and outside the process). An important difference between action research and more conventional research, is that documentation is a tool of the project itself and is used to communicate with project members. As a result cycles of documentation and dissemination should be short – to match and support the learning cycle itself.

Action research in EMPOWERS: lessons from a project

EMPOWERS is an action research project, now coming to an end, that over almost five years has worked with local government stakeholders in Egypt, Palestine and Jordan to develop improved tools and approaches for improved water governance. In particular, searching for more participatory and strategic management of water services and resources.

Action research based approaches were used within the project at two very distinct levels: firstly, in the development of the planning tools to support improved local water governance; and secondly, actually encapsulated in the strategic approach itself through use of a programme cycle with a strong emphasis on monitoring and feedback underpinning adaptive management.

The main channel for the action research, as in SWITCH, was the development of stakeholder platforms at intermediate (governorate) and local (communities in small-towns and villages) level supported by national level steering committees. In other words a learning alliance. These groups were supported in one governorate in each country by national teams of approximately four people consisting of team leader, two field workers and a process documentalist. Together the teams and stakeholders developed both the approach, and the capacity to implement it.

A number of lessons have been learned during the implementation of EMPOWERS about the use of action research within processes of sector reform, in brief these include:

- That, as mentioned earlier, there is no blueprint or hard-and-fast set of rules for action research – it is an approach or philosophy. It was implemented in markedly different ways in the different countries, and with teams composed of members from widely differing institutions. For example, the Jordan team composed of NGO and government staff on secondment was housed within local government offices; whilst the Palestine team was made up entirely of NGO staff (from three different institutes) and was housed by one of them.
- Stakeholder involvement sounds and is both good and essential. Yet it is unrealistic to expect all stakeholders to engage to the same degree all the time. Very complex issues of individual versus institutional interest and involvement come into play, and different members can play widely differing roles over time.
- Linked to the above, and because action research implies change, there will be (institutional and individual) drivers and resisters to the innovation and change. What is essential is to have at least one champion amongst key stakeholders – someone who believes in the overall vision of the process, and has the conviction and negotiation skills to carry other less sure stakeholders with them – as well as to overcome or neutralise those who are actively hostile.
- Depending upon the nature of the society in which the AR takes place, for experts involved in the work, learning to say ‘I don’t know’ can be one of the most difficult and challenging elements. The EMPOWERS country teams, who were recruited from very experienced technical and project management staff found it initially very difficult to lead stakeholders in a process where the end-vision may have been clear – but the path to it most definitely was not. They were constantly worried that being seen to be unsure would lead to a loss of faith in them by the other stakeholders – and in eventual failure.
- Action research while conceptually simple is in fact very challenging, both personally and managerially, particularly for those initiating/facilitating the process. For researchers it means abandoning the safety of playing the disinterested and objective outside observer – and accepting being an actor within a process; for actors it means opening up your way of working to the penetrating stare of outsiders. For all it means embarking on a journey whose path is often far from clear – and by its nature not always guaranteed of success.
- More prosaically, action research is often expensive. While more conventional research can

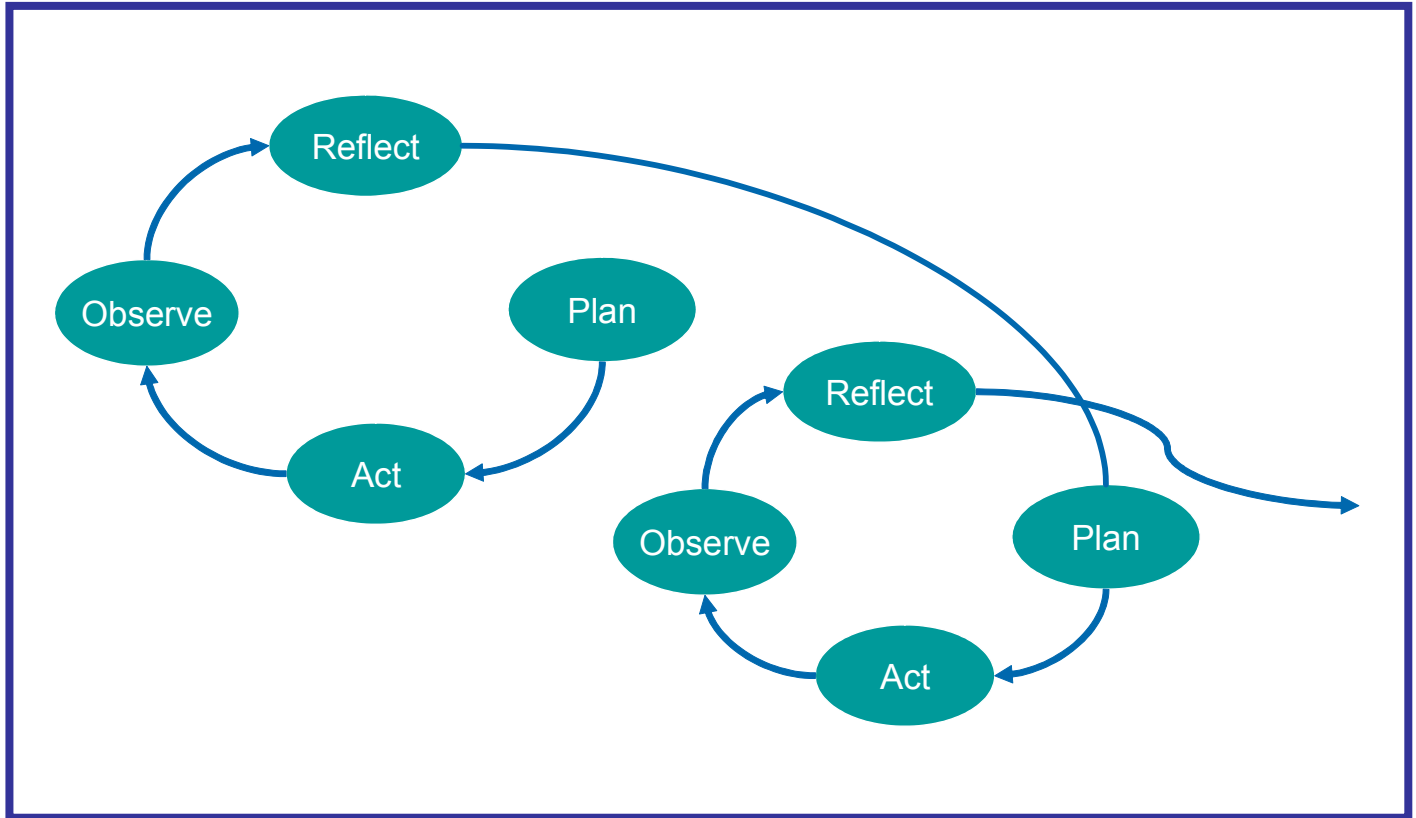
often be done relatively cheaply – using snapshot surveys etc; the need to engage fully within an often lengthy process calls for skilled people – who typically cost a lot. Additional costs are also implied by the need to build in space for reflection (during which people are not 'working' – but often taking part in meetings and workshops) and for

documentation which can be expensive and again calls for specialised skills.

Reference

Rory O'Brien (1998) An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research.

Figure 1 Cycles in action research



For more information please contact: John Butterworth, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (butterworth@irc.nl) who coordinates the learning alliance workpackage within SWITCH project, or Patrick Moriarty (moriarty@irc.nl) who prepared this briefing note. Or visit www.switchurbanwater.eu/learningalliances The experience of EMPOWERS have been extensively documented and more information can be found at www.empowers.info.

SWITCH (Sustainable Water Management Improves Tomorrows Cities Health) is a research partnership supported by the European Community (Framework 6 Programme) and a consortium of 33 partners.