Impact Measurement Approaches and Methodologies: Action Research
Background Paper

1. Introduction

This background paper seeks to provide further detail on Action Research approaches and their use in Impact Evaluation. It will first look at the possible applications of Action Research approaches in international development and humanitarian assistance. Secondly, it will explore Action Research approaches in a little more depth through looking at their definitions, origins and theoretical and methodological foundations. Finally, it will examine some of the advantages and disadvantages of Action Research approaches, specifically in relation to their use as an approach to Impact Evaluation.

2. Application

Action Research approaches can be used for a wide range of purposes within international development and humanitarian assistance including research, individual and organisational learning, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and Impact Evaluation. In relation to Impact Evaluation, Action Research approaches can be used either on their own or in conjunction with other Impact Evaluation designs and methods as part of a mixed methods approach.

3. Approach

3.1 Defining Action Research

Action Research is a label that covers a broad family of approaches that share similar characteristics: they are typically values based, action oriented and participatory. First, all Action Research approaches are both informed and driven by the values of the researcher and participants, and promote a particular conception of the common good or human wellbeing. Second, they are action-oriented because the research leads to action, usually the changing or improvement of practices or interventions. Finally, Action Research approaches are participatory; they involve a collective process of knowledge generation and ultimately aim to democratise the knowledge generation process. Reason and Bradbury, two leading Action Researchers, describe Action Research as:

“A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (2001: p1)

3.2 The origins of Action Research

Action Research has a complex history. It has not emerged from a single academic discipline; Action Research approaches have slowly developed over time within a wide range of disciplines and professions including education, psychology, social policy,
community development and international development (Brydon-Miller, 2003). New approaches are continually emerging and existing approaches altered and refined. Some of the most widely recognised Action Research approaches include Classical Action Research, Action Learning, Action Science, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Community-Based Participatory Research, Appreciative Inquiry and Living Theory (James et al. 2011, Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

3.3 Theoretical foundations of Action Research

Action Research approaches have common ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations. Firstly, Action Researchers are subjective not objective; they are value laden and morally committed (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). Secondly, they understand knowledge as socially constructed and plural (Hinchey, 2008). Action Researchers also highlight the importance of reflexivity in the production of knowledge: good Action Researchers should continually question the evidence, what they think they know, their approach, the choices they make during the research process, their findings and what they do with their findings. Finally, the methodology employed by Action Researchers should be practitioner focused (either led by or conducted in close collaboration with practitioners) and highly participatory, with stakeholders involved at all stages of the research process (Bradbury-Huang, 2010).

Consequently, Action Research approaches are typically placed within interpretive as opposed to the conventional positivist approach to social science. Many Action Researchers are very critical of positivism, arguing that Action Research represents both a critique and alternative to positivism (Brydon-Miller, 2003).

3.4 The Action Research Cycle

In practice, most Action Research approaches use a variant of a methodological process known as the Action Research Cycle (see Figure 1). This is essentially a cycle with 3 steps: planning action, taking action and evaluating action, which is repeated throughout the research process.

![Figure 1: Typical Action Research Cycle](image)

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) use a four-step cycle that has one pre-step, which unlike the others is not repeated throughout the research. In this approach, Action Researchers first establish the context and purpose of the research and form collaborative working relationships. Once this is done, researchers and participants jointly construct the issues, plan action, take action and then evaluate this action – a cycle that is repeated throughout the research process.
4. Advantages of Action Research as an approach to Impact Evaluation

Action Research approaches to Impact Evaluation have a number of advantages, particularly for international development and humanitarian organisations in comparison to more conventional approaches to Impact Evaluation. This is largely due to the participatory nature of Action Research approaches.

4.1 Participation

Action Research approaches are highly participatory. In Action Research approaches, researchers and stakeholders collaborate in the diagnosis of a problem and the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions to solve it. Within the international development and humanitarian sector and particularly among many civil society organisations and NGOs, participation is regarded as a normative good. However it is also increasingly recognised as a means of improving impact. This instrumental view of participation is based on the assumption that participation generates ownership, making interventions more targeted and relevant and increasing the ‘agency’ of stakeholders who help ‘cause’ successful outcomes though their own actions and decisions (Stern et al., 2012).

4.2 Downward accountability and legitimacy

As a result of their highly participatory nature, Action Research approaches to Impact Evaluation have the potential to facilitate downward accountability (to stakeholders, participants and beneficiaries), as well as upward accountability (to donors and senior organisational management). In contrast to many other Impact Evaluation approaches, which are driven by top-down demands and requirements, Action Research approaches should be constructed, implemented and evaluated jointly between Action Researchers and wide range of stakeholders including both ‘upward’ stakeholders (e.g. donors, senior organisational management) and ‘downward’ stakeholders (e.g. programme staff, beneficiaries, members of the wider local community). However, the challenge for Action Researchers is adequately balancing the demands and requirements of all stakeholders, something that many struggle with in practice.

Meaningful inclusion of ‘downward’ stakeholders in an Impact Evaluation, particularly capturing and taking into consideration their views and opinions on causal inference, may also lend both the process and findings of an Impact Evaluation added legitimacy.

4.3 Organisational and individual learning

Action Research approaches to evaluation are also particularly good at promoting organisational and individual learning. Where conventional approaches to Impact Evaluation can be very extractive, Action Research approaches to evaluation support the retention of knowledge within local communities and organisations and generate space for reflection and learning. Many organisations that choose Action Research approaches do so specifically because of their capacity to support processes of organisational and individual learning.

4.4 In-depth understanding of local contexts

Action Research approaches also provide an in depth understanding of local contexts and communities. In Impact Evaluations, such in-depth knowledge has the potential to improve construct validity of the evaluation i.e. it helps impact evaluators ensure that they are actually measuring what they think that they are measuring. (Stern et al,
In-depth understanding of local contexts may also facilitate the improvement of existing practices and interventions in that context, thus improving impact.

4.5 Dealing with complexity

Action Research approaches may also be particularly suitable for evaluating complex programmes where conventional Impact Evaluation designs may be difficult or inappropriate because the presence of multiple and interrelated variables makes determining causality and therefore impact of a specific intervention or set of interventions very challenging. Action Research approaches typically create a ‘holding environment’, a space where entwined issues can be teased out so that Action Researchers can focus on specific issues whilst maintaining an appreciation of their interconnected nature and the broader context within which they exist (James et al, 2011). Where Action Researchers approaches come into their own is enabling the design, implementation and improvement of interventions to address specific issues in complex situations whilst simultaneously filling gaps in knowledge, evidence and theory (Stern, 2012).

5. Challenges of Action Research as an approach to Impact Evaluation

5.1 Ensuring meaningful participation in practice

Ensuring full and meaningful participation throughout the research process is a challenge for many Action Researchers, particularly in the context of international development and humanitarian assistance. Many find it especially difficult to include field staff and beneficiaries in the initial stages of Action Research for a wide range of reasons. Consequently, many Action Research-oriented projects and evaluations are initially driven by top-down rather than bottom up demands. Action Researchers also often have to manage multiple and competing demands throughout the research process. Action Researchers must therefore be careful to balance top-down and bottom up demands and ensure full and meaningful participation at all stages of the process.

5.2. Ensuring quality and rigor

Action Research approaches are often criticised for lacking quality and rigor, particularly by positivist social science, which critiques Action Research approaches for lacking objectivity, validity (whether the research findings really are about what they say they are about) and generalizability (the applicability of research findings outwith the specific context studied). Action Researchers have sought to counter these critiques in a variety of ways from devising alternative quality assurance mechanisms (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011) to rejecting them outright for judging Action Research against a set of criteria that are not suitable (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

In Impact Evaluation, participatory approaches such as Action Research have been criticised for lacking rigor as they take a very different approach to establishing causal inference to that of experimental or statistical approaches, which use counterfactuals or statistical correlations to demonstrate causality, and are therefore deemed more ‘rigorous’. However, Action Research approaches do not need to be used in isolation; other designs and methods can be used to triangulate or complement findings established through Action Research or vice versa, thus improving rigor (Stern et al, 2012).
6. Conclusions

As with all Impact Evaluation approaches, there are some situations where Action Research approaches are appropriate and others where they are not. What is most important is that evaluators pick the most suitable Impact Evaluation approach for both the context that is being evaluated and the evaluation questions asked (Stern et al, 2012). Also, evaluators need not rely on a single approach; mixed approaches and methods can be used and are even favoured by many as a means of increasing the quality, rigor and value of Impact Evaluations. The intrinsic value of Action Research approaches to Impact Evaluation lies in their ability to support downward accountability and organisational learning, and improve practice whilst simultaneously addressing gaps in evidence and theory. Where these issues are pertinent, Action Research approaches should be considered, either as a standalone approach or as part of a mixed methods approach to Impact Evaluation.

7. Bibliography

Bradbury-Huang (2010) “What is good Action Research?: Why the resurgent interest?” in Action Research Volume 8, Issue 1


McNiff and Whitehead (2011) All You Need to Know About Action Research (Los Angeles: SAGE)