UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY
UNU-CRIS
Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies

The Open University

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

UKaid from the British people

Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: NEW USES, NEW CONTEXTS, NEW CHALLENGES[1]

Ana B. Amaya and Nicola Yeates[2]

PRARI Working Paper 15-6

PRARI poverty reduction and regional integration
RePIR reducción de la pobreza e integración regional

[1] This work was carried out with support from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant Ref. ES/L005336/1, and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the ESRC. An earlier version of this paper was presented by the authors to the ESRC-DfID conference on Poverty Reduction, London 9th September 2014. The authors thank the conference participants, and members of the PRARI (Poverty Reduction and Regional Integration) research team, Stephen Kingah, Pia Riggirozzi, Diana Tussie, and Erica Penfold, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. Further information about PRARI can be accessed via the project website hosted by The Open University: http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/

[2] Ana B. Amaya is based at the United Nations University Institute for Comparative Regional Integration Studies, where she is Research Fellow in the PRARI research project. Nicola Yeates is based at The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, and is Principal Investigator of the PRARI project.

Abstract

The relevance of Participatory action research (PAR) within policy-facing social sciences research, while long established, is increasingly recognized due to a growing emphasis on research uptake and impact. This is because participatory research affirms stakeholders as agents bringing diverse knowledge and techniques, and a commitment to and ownership of research findings and outputs in ways that are deemed more likely to be translated into action. Reviewing why participatory research is relevant for research uptake and impact agendas, we consider the opportunities, tensions, dilemmas and limits of participatory research in impact contexts internationally, including where these involve 'non-standard' PAR populations. Participatory research, we argue, raises a number of challenges -- professional, political, logistical -- which take on further dimensions where research is conducted with policy stakeholders and is international. In addition, how PAR is applied in practice and the context of that practice bear significantly on the quality and nature of the research outcomes. Just as research pathways to impact are multiform and context-specific, so too are PAR pathways. We highlight the considerable potential of a better understanding of the relationship between PAR and policy change as a research topic in its own right.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, power, impact, policy change

1. Introduction

Participatory action research is used widely as a research strategy across the social and health sciences wherein it has become strongly associated with the production of knowledge for action that is of direct benefit and use to people, most of all to those living in conditions of social vulnerability, disadvantage and oppression. PAR is distinguished from conventional research less by the specific methods it uses than by the methodological contexts in which particular methods are used, and by its overarching emancipatory orientation towards the research participants who take ownership of the research and seek to apply its results to improve their living conditions or effect other kinds of social change. Participatory research advocates argue that valuing otherwise marginalised knowledge and experiences through active participation of research 'subjects' in the research process democratises knowledge production, secures ownership of the research and improves research quality, leading to a greater likelihood that results will be put into practice (Greenwood 1993; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; van Niekerk and van Niekerk 2009). There is, then, a growing belief that participatory approaches can improve research quality and wider impact.

PAR tends, then, to be used in a range of involving social groups living in conditions of social disadvantage and/or oppression. In the area of health, for example, PAR is frequently associated with community-based projects in low-income settings where it tends to be used for needs assessment and planning for health services evaluation (De Koning and Martin, 1996; Baum, McDougall and Smith, 2006); work with indigenous populations (Hecker, 1997; Pyett, 2002); and in high-income settings primarily used to empower patients in participating in decision-making about forms of treatment (Weaver and Nicholls, 2001). There is little documented evidence of this research approach being used to address other kinds of populations, such as policy makers and other social 'elites'.

One possible explanation for this is publication bias, where unsuccessful results are not reported. One of the exceptional examples is a study published by Eyben and colleagues (2007) where they discuss an unsuccessful PAR project that sought to understand relations between donors and recipients in Burkina Faso, Bolivia and Bangladesh. A preparatory phase was funded by UK Department for International

Development (DFID) and was planned with the recognition that it entailed an innovative use of PAR among these two groups of actors. Shortly after the start of the project they stopped their work in Burkina Faso due to communication and travel problems. Workshops were organized in the other two countries but the project did not continue beyond this preparatory phase due to scepticism and lack of commitment in the Bangladesh cohort as well as disenchantment with the methodology from the leading researcher from that region. In the case of Bolivia, there was greater commitment to the process, but the political and economic crisis in the country meant that opportunities for reflection were few. This demonstrates that while there is increasing interest in using PAR to work with policy makers as a means of effecting policy change, which is how we define 'impact' in this paper, there is a dearth of academic and evaluation literature on this. One of the consequences of this is that there is a notable lack of 'how to' guidance for all involved that might otherwise help work through what it means to participate in research using PAR and the nature of tangible impacts that this approach can realistically achieve on policy and wider social change.

This paper focuses on the research outcomes elements of the case for PAR. We examine arguments, tensions, dilemmas, opportunities and limits of participatory action research specifically in terms of uptake and impact agendas. The methodological nature and benefits of PAR are not the main focus of the paper but are within scope of the discussion insofar as they inform the general concern of this paper - namely how participatory research can be understood and practiced as a *research orientation for achieving research impact*. Our purpose is not to provide a blueprint for practice, or to recommend the use of PAR in every context, but to broadly identify some key challenges, synergies and tensions in using PAR. More particularly still, our main concern lies with using PAR in relation to policy makers and in international development contexts, not least because that is of direct concern to our research project (PRARI).[3] In this case, we are interested in the ways in which working with policy makers in a PAR process may forge a 'pathway to impact', that is, leading to policy reform and wider social change. In this context, policy change is the anticipated impact. While PAR has its limitations, it has the potential to bring about possible opportunities to address key policy issues with those able to affect 'upstream'

[3] PRARI is the acronym for Poverty Reduction and Regional Integration: a comparative analysis of SADC and UNASUR health policies. Further information about the project as a whole can be found at http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/

causes of social issues, especially considering the different levels of decision-making nationally and internationally. In this sense, we discuss possible applications of PAR in this new space and its relationship with impact.

We argue that there is no intrinsic synergy or automatic relationship between the adoption of participatory methods and research uptake and impact. Of course, this is a problem common to research projects in general but the more instrumentalist approaches to PAR may inadvertently raise expectations about what it may be possible to achieve. More particularly, how PAR is applied in practice and the context in and conditions under which it is practiced bears significantly on the successful achievement of research outcomes. Just as research pathways to uptake and impact are multiform and context-specific, so too are PAR pathways. We reflect on some conditions mediating the PAR-uptake/impact relationship and identify how the professional, political and logistical challenges associated with PAR are further complicated in a context where research is in the field of international development and oriented towards working with 'non-standard' PAR populations. Our focus on policy makers breaks from assumptions within PAR literatures that those with whom research is undertaken are necessarily 'local' powerless and vulnerable populations. It also raises wider issues about the conditions under which using PAR with social groups in relatively strong positions of power can generate significant uptake and impact. We do not explore this latter point in this paper other than to flag it up as an area for future consideration and as a potential new line of enquiry in an expansive social research field on participatory methods.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section gives an introductory overview of participatory action research and benefits attributed to it. It distinguishes between 'conventional' research approaches and PAR modes of engagement with stakeholders, and sets out the prospective benefits of participatory research in terms of their fit with impact agendas. The paper then delves deeper into the challenges related to power imbalances, from an impact perspective, of using participatory methods and collaborative research in an international context. This is followed by a general discussion of the implications of these findings in section four. The concluding section distils key arguments of the paper with reference to the opportunities, tensions, dilemmas and limits of participatory research with policy makers in international impact contexts.

2. Participatory and non-participatory research: distinctions and benefits

The distinguishing characteristics of participatory research and non-participatory research are not immediately apparent, especially in a context where the term participation bestows legitimacy and is widely applied to a wide range of research approaches and methods. As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) point out, all research involves participation of some kind at some stage in the process. Some projects involve only limited interactions with people outside the research team but can be termed participatory, whereas others involving a high level of in-depth participation at certain stages of the project without being considered participatory. If all research involves participation, they ask, what are the defining features of participatory research?

> What is distinctive about PR is not the method, but the methodological contexts of the application of methods…Locating debate about PR within the controversies about the qualitative-quantitative divide obscures issues of agency, representation and power which lie at the core of the methodological critiques from which the development of participatory approaches stem…The key difference between participatory and other research methodologies lies in the location of power in the various stages of the research process. (Cornwall and Jewkes pp. 1667-1668)

Participatory research is in theory not a specific research method but an *orientation* or *approach* to research based on a commitment to egalitarianism, pluralism and interconnectedness in the research process. It is distinguished from 'conventional' research by virtue of the purpose of research and the process by which it is carried out. PAR is also distinguished from 'extractive research' where research is conducted in a country using valuable resources that are never fed back to the participants or research subjects, or applied in the studied communities. Table 1 schematically sets out the key distinguishing characteristics of these two research orientations including the processes underpinning them.

Table 1 Participatory and conventional research: a comparison of process

	Participatory research	**Conventional research**
What is the research for?	Action	Understanding with perhaps action later.
Who is the research for?	Local people	Institutional, personal and professional interests.
Whose knowledge counts?	Local people's	Scientists.
Topic choice influenced by?	Local priorities	Funding priorities, institutional agendas, professional interests.
Role of researcher	Facilitator, catalyst	Director.
Methodology chosen for?	Empowerment, mutual learning	Disciplinary conventions, 'objectivity' and 'truth'
Who takes part in the stages of research process?		
Problem identification	Local people	Researcher.
Data collection	Local people	Researcher, enumerator.
Interpretation	Local concepts and frameworks	Disciplinary concepts and frameworks
Analysis	Local people	Researcher
Presentation of findings	Locally accessible and useful	By researcher to other academics or funding body
Action on findings	Integral to the process	Separate and may not happen
Who takes action?	Local people, with/without external support	External agencies
Who owns the results?	Shared	The researcher
What is emphasised?	Process	Outcomes

Source: adapted from Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), Table 1, p. 1669

PAR involves the production of knowledge for action. PAR is meant to honour and value the knowledge of non-professional researchers and local priorities influence the choice of research topic. In contrast, non-participatory research is oriented to producing knowing for understanding from which action *may* flow subsequently, is framed by institutional and professional interests and agendas and draws on scientific expertise. In participatory research, local people are involved at all stages of the research process, from problem identification to analysis, whereas in non-participatory research the researcher sets and controls the research process, remains firmly rooted within his/her disciplinary boundaries, agendas and priorities located within the institutional-professional-academy nexus. In participatory research 'local' people work with researchers collaboratively and collegiately, in contrast to conventional research wherein they are contracted to the research as research subjects whose knowledge and experience is exploited for the specific purpose of the researcher-defined and –led research. The remainder of this section turns to focus on three interlinked themes within the participatory research literature: empowerment and social learning; power and ownership; and knowledge for action.

2.1 Inquiry as empowerment and social learning

Reason (1994) argues that PAR is a methodology for an alternative system of knowledge production-based analysis involving the controlled use of outcomes. Transcending the distinctions between activism and research, it achieves 'common sense' understanding and academic expertise through its double objective: to produce knowledge and action of direct use to people, and to empower people through the process of involving them directly in constructing and using their own knowledge. The emphasis on inquiry as empowerment emerges from PAR's identification with Habermas' articulation that knowledge, methodology and human interests are inextricably linked, and with a more general recognition for a critical social science that serves emancipatory interests. In the words of Reason (1994):

> The emphasis on inquiry as empowerment means that for participatory action researchers 'the methodologies that in orthodox research would be called research design, data gathering, data analysis and so on are secondary to the emergent processes of collaboration and dialogue that empower, motivate, increase self-esteem and develop community solidarity.

In PAR, then, the research process is emphasised and research methodologies, while important, are in service of the primary objectives. Outcomes of research including when and how they are taken into practice are determined through the collaborative research process itself. PAR research is committed to knowledge-based change, and while it is reliant on participants' involvement in initiating or facilitating the process and putting research outcomes into practice, as an approach it remains responsive to research partners throughout the research process. In this sense, PAR practices iterative participation: stakeholders are continually involved in planning, testing, reflecting and generating mechanisms for action. More than that, though, it is a flexible process of *social learning*:

> PAR is a reflective and collaborative process of problem-solving. It is generally applied within social learning contexts, where multiple actors collectively define the problem and objectives, and work towards solutions. Iterative cycles of action and reflection make change processes more robust by ensuring that learning and sharing take place, that actions are adjusted to align with objectives, and that the actors themselves learn and adapt. (IDRC/CRDI/DfiD 2012: 2)

2.2 Power, control and ownership

PAR is heterodox in the modes of participation it incorporates. Following Biggs (1989, cited in Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995: 1669), modes of participation range from 'shallow' 'contractual' modes at one end of the spectrum involving the retention of maximal ownership and control by researchers over the research process, to 'deep' 'collegiate' modes at the other end of the spectrum, whereby ownership of research is devolved to the extent that it is controlled by participants rather than by researchers (Table 2).

Table 2 Continua of participation in research projects

Contractual	People are contracted into projects directed by researchers to take part in their enquiries or experiments	Deep ←----------→ Shallow Ownership devolved-r---------- researcher-controlled
Consultative	People are asked for their opinions and consulted by researchers before interventions are made	
Collaborative	Researchers and local people work together on projects designed, initiated and managed by researchers	
Collegiate	Researchers and local people work together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process	

Source: Cornwall and Jewkes (1995: 1669), following Biggs

These four modes of participation suggest less defined models for action than a participation-control nexus wherein the boundaries between participatory and conventional research are differently drawn. For example, 'shallow' modes of participation with the objective of including and empowering participants through professional relations of collegiality may – to many eyes - bear more than a passing resemblance to conventional research approaches. At the same time, however, it is important to recognise that there may be movement between one mode to another at different stages of research and for different purposes (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995: 1669). For example, professional researchers may be called on for direction at the outset of the project, and contract people into exercises to facilitate reflection and analysis as a prelude to 'deeper' collaboration, evolving into more collegiate processes of mutual learning, and later on into local people contracting in expert outsiders to conduct or facilitate research (ibid).

As Table 2 suggests, defining features of participatory research are the relinquishing of full control and ownership of the research process. 'Arguably, 'participatory research' consists less of modes of research which merely involve participation in data collection than of those which address issues of the setting of agendas, ownership of results, power and control' (ibid). At the same time, beyond

the markedly different research dynamics that these diverse modes engender, participatory research signals a critical role for and influence of the researcher while also carrying risks as well as benefits. In relation to the latter, research projects involving participatory research (especially collaborative and collegiate modes of participation) need to factor in and identify degrees of uncertainty and risk that are not normally encountered by or required by projects using conventional methods. They need to plan for flexibility and longer time-lines for the research from the outset. In practice, demonstrating tangible uptake and impact outcomes may be as difficult to achieve in practice as they are using 'conventional' research methods, but the conditions under which those uptake and impact objectives are optimally achieved in projects using participatory methods need to be clearly identified rather than assumed. We return to this point later in the paper. For now, we simply note the 'messiness' of participatory research, and that it may sit uneasily with 'linear' models of research, funders' preferences for clearly identifiable accountable persons and with the exigencies of tangible research uptake and impact 'deliverables' during what are usually relatively short research project lifespans.

2.3 Knowledge → action

In theory PAR offers significant advantages over 'conventional' research models whereby research developed by researchers in a process defined and controlled by researchers are passively transferred to research subjects and/or other research users. Arguments in favour of PAR hinge on the 'virtuous' relationship between knowledge, ownership and action. PAR affirms stakeholders in the research process as agents bringing diverse knowledge and techniques, and this affirmation brings a commitment to and ownership of research findings and outputs more likely be translated into action and effect social change (Bergold and Thomas 2012; Loewensen et al, 2014). Pro-PAR advocacy arguments centre on the intrinsic and instrumental value of interaction and collaboration between the researchers in terms of understanding and local practice: whether because they lead to clearer or new understandings of concepts (e.g. of vulnerability), coherent application of known techniques in new contexts (sustainable, field-tested solutions), or to new techniques themselves (e.g. approaches to adaptation). The following quote taken from an internationally funded development project on smallholder adaption illustrates this point about the perceived close relationship between the PAR approach and impact:

> The PAR approach enables smallholders, extension agents, researchers, the private sector, policy makers and other stakeholders to jointly identify problems and then select, test and refine options. This greatly increases the likelihood of reaching appropriate and sustainable solutions. (Mapfumo et al., 2012: 3)

At the same time it needs to be recognised that the PAR approach *can* lead to more informed policy. It can potentially do this in a number of ways, by:

- *Enhancing mutual learning*: insofar as research projects practising PAR facilitate interaction and learning, and promote collaboration, they can help promote mutual understanding, and gain deeper insights and understandings of the complexities of a given issue;
- *Enhancing policy dialogue and coordination*: research projects practising PAR promote collaboration insofar as they act as a broker or dialogic platform for participant-stakeholders; they can help build the development of partnerships that in turn facilitate institutional collaboration and potentially policy coordination;
- *Promoting research uptake*: the research team can stimulate demand for their work among research users/policy makers, though the extent of this demand may depend on a prior level of awareness of issues. Where policy-makers are already aware of a need or where teams enjoy institutional links with research users, projects can help inform new plans and policies;
- *Generating a better understanding of the policy process*: it can inform/influence policies by bringing new perspectives into the political process of policy-making; it can generate learning among participants as to how they can more effectively work with the policy process and policy makers (Loewenson et al., 2015).

In short, we need to distinguish several different potential PAR pathways to policy change and identify the processes leading to this change. Applications of PAR to policy (as distinct from professional or local practice contexts) constitutes a relatively recent direction in the use of PAR, and its use and outcomes are less well documented and understood. Its use in these contexts take us directly into the realm of multi (or indeed inter-) disciplinary investigations of complex social problems embedded in complex

social and political systems; specifically, it takes us into squarely into the realm of more conventional policy research. What Tussie (2009) terms 'post-academic' research, this research is: politically embedded in the context of policy priorities and actions resulting from ongoing engagement with decision makers; more embedded in stakeholder systems than in academic or professional ones; and is problem-focused and –driven (ibid: 15-16). We do not discuss this further here, other than noting that policy research studies is a research field in its own right with which there is the potential for mutual engagement with the issues we raise in this paper.

Having set out key elements of participatory action research and its links to research uptake and impact agendas as well as to the policy-research nexus more widely, the next (second) part of the paper proceeds to explore further some key facets. Drawing on secondary sources we consider the in-principle challenges, tensions, and dilemmas navigated in practicing PAR. We give dedicated consideration to what it might mean to practice PAR in policy-facing and international contexts and with 'non-standard' PAR populations. Retaining our focus on uptake/impact, we posit that assumptions about action/uptake claims need to be surfaced and interrogated. Claims about participatory research as an intrinsically strong method for achieving change – seductive as they are - need to be probed: here, we question whether they are *necessarily* more true than for non-participatory research all other things being equal. How PAR is used in practice and the context(s) in which it is practiced strongly mediate that research-change nexus. At the same time, PAR pathways to impact are necessarily context-specific and multiform (Carden, 2007).

3. Balancing power, and other methodological considerations

The use of participatory methods entails specific challenges related with the process of collectively undertaking research and generating findings. These challenges are at once methodological and logistical in nature. As noted earlier, the issue of power is key within the PAR literature. Moreover, while the use of PAR requires reflexivity common to other types of qualitative research its basis in collaborative work means that distinctive ethical implications can emerge during the research process. McDonald (2009), for example, identifies the differences between individual and community-level risks and benefits as follows:

1) Tensions between those directly involved in the issues and those less directly involved and their relative power in the process;

2) Bias in who represents communities;

3) Tensions over whose interests are driving the process;

4) Managing privacy and protecting information that communities or individuals do not want widely disclosed;

5) Tensions over how the evidence and analysis is documented and reported;

6) How unfavourable or negative information will be managed;

7) Social harms, for example when a marginal group becomes more aware of their disadvantaged position, and become more stressed or unhappy; and

8) Risks from participating in the action phase, which may lead to unfavourable consequences from those taking action from people in higher positions of power.

These tensions are also applicable when working with PAR in an international context. As might be expected, the ways in which these tensions manifest themselves depends on the setting, nature and purposes of the research. Nevertheless, it is clear that certain power imbalances are unavoidable when involving a varied group of stakeholders in the research process, particularly when they represent different countries or regions. This is not necessarily negative: there are clear benefits of a well-respected member encouraging the participation of others, especially this brings in additional or new perspectives (Christopher et al. 2008). At the same time, it is important to recognise that the research process can be more easily facilitated if organised through medium of dominant groups – such as those who are professionally proximate to research, who are most able to draw on or mobilise resources, and able to articulate issues and concerns using common conceptual or political 'grammar'. If power inequalities 'silence' some, they amplify the voices of others. If carefully balancing competing priorities and negotiating common positions is a key tenet of participatory research, then the skills of the professional researcher can be crucial in mediating different interests in the process of arriving at a common position. These challenges become all the more pronounced and acute in relation to politicised topics such as health and other social inequalities. Below we elaborate on these points further, starting with a consideration of the role of the stakeholders, followed by that of the researchers.

3.1 The role of the stakeholders

The cyclical nature of a research project that uses PAR methodologies requires a stable group of stakeholders, preferably who are involved throughout the span of the research project. Ensuring that commitment and momentum is sustained is crucial for this but maintaining group cohesiveness over time can be challenging. These challenges are related to both the nature of the collaborators (for example, policy-makers may not necessarily be able to fully engage in what can be a time-consuming process) and the alignment of interests.

The core of the participatory approach is the generation of collective knowledge through partnerships between professional researchers and 'local' experts, in order to enhance research outcomes beyond what can be achieved by an individual or team of professional researchers. However, partnerships are not intrinsically synergistic and require the alignment of purpose, values and goals (Jagosh et al., 2012). As mentioned earlier, in an international context, this requires reaching consensus among individuals from different cultural, social and political backgrounds. When working with stakeholders from different countries, this inevitably uncovers power imbalances and tensions that are may result from structures of international political economy – namely, the geo-strategic position of the countries that these individuals represent or are citizens of. This uncovers another layer of negotiation that requires the researcher be aware of, in terms of the cultural or political sensitivities involved, and allow for in ensuring all participants' voices are heard and treated equitably and respectfully.

This was one of the issues identified in the PRARI, where one of the goals is to collaboratively develop pro-poor health policy monitoring systems in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) regions with the use of PAR methods. In this case, the opportunities for interaction and capacity building were not only between stakeholders from countries (from non-state sectors as well as governmental), some of which having divergent characteristics, but also with regional-level officials. Identifying perspectives, building trust, bridging understandings, strengthening bonds, facilitating information sharing and interactivity, and negotiating participation and a common 'platform' were among the many key tasks and skills involved (Amaya et al., 2015).

The alignment of the varied interests towards a common goal may lead to sharing of experiences and expanding partnerships to other areas of work beyond the research project, generating not just momentum but also capacity in the process. The importance of generating capacity becomes even more relevant when working with stakeholders from countries with varying levels of development or with limited access to data or other resources (Amaya, Kingah and De Lombaerde, 2015). This is directly related to the question of the potential for developing sustainable solutions to the research goal. The aperture of channels of communication through partnerships means that there is greater possibility for mechanisms to be in place to respond to unexpected challenges. In the case of studies where policy change is the objective, fostering sustained and engaged collaborative inputs is vital for championing the process and final outputs and the realisation of policy change over the longer-term.

3.2 The role of the researcher

The issue of power previously discussed has also been described as democracy in action research. This means the researcher is not just an equal member of the research partnership: s/he is a key facilitator of change, working closely with the collaborators in each step of the research process to arrive at an agreed outcome. This inevitably requires the researcher works beyond the boundaries of what would often be counted as research, juggling at times with competing and complex agendas. The significance of researchers' excellent interpersonal and facilitation skills alongside their research skills cannot be underestimated (Meyer, 2000; Loewenson et al., 2014).

Moreover, positive outcomes require time to build trust (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) and funders' expectations of outcomes over what may be a relatively condensed time frame may not always fit in with the reflexive nature of such an approach (Springett and Wallerstein, 2008). This means that in some cases the researcher may struggle between academic goals such as publishing peer-reviewed articles and the more distant outcomes associated with a PAR project (Loewenson et al., 2014). This is a clear limitation when it comes to projects with finite funding, clear lines of responsibility and accountability, and project targets. One issue here is that impacts may come to fruition only long after the award period.

Methodologically, the researcher must contend with concerns about how to verify that their research is applicable for other contexts, specifically ensuring internal and external validity, and generalizability. These difficulties are not unique to

participatory methods and can be raised in most use of qualitative methodologies. Nevertheless, PAR is not exempt from such methodological concerns, and addressing these issues include an assessment of context, providing evidence of collective validation, peer-review and feasibility of results through the participatory process and other methods such as triangulating with other techniques to obtain complementary data (Loewenson et al., 2015). As with most case studies, results tend to be context-specific but there is potential for generating transferable insights through theoretical generalizability and may also suggest a revision of prior hypotheses (Gilson, 2012; Flyverg, 2001).

PAR itself may entail unpredictable and long time periods. This is compounded by the possible unevenness in participants' skill and knowledge levels. These issues escalate when working in international context where the researcher may be located far from the PAR collaborators with relatively limited face-to-face interactions. This has implications for trust-building and can translate into significant financial investment, which may be higher than using conventional research methods. The PRARI project found the supplementary use of ICTs essential in this regard, likewise working with local partners who can support the process. As unpredictable as the process may be it may also lead to opportunities for greater impact that were not previously anticipated (Viswanathan et al., 2004), the pursuit of which can have significant cost (e.g. finance, time) implications.

Finally, the researcher's affiliation (whether in terms of their institution, or the project funding source) and social background (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality) may also generate responses from collaborators who may believe that there are a priori expectations about what results, findings and solutions are acceptable. Zemelmann (2000), for example, describes this potential bias where the normative perspective of the researchers and practitioners may lead to them interpreting information in a particular way, or looking for clues and signs of what they expect to see or would like to see. There is scope for such misunderstandings to arise and affect the responses of the team, especially where one or more international donors may be involved.

4. Conclusion

While PAR seeks to address the challenges in producing action-led research, as any research approach, it is affected by context. It must contend with external forces related to the professional and institutional agendas of those involved, and it may be

perceived by some as a means of legitimising donors' agendas (Casaburi et al., 2000; Tussie, 2009). In relation to the latter, ideals of democracy used to advocate participation in research may amount to cultural imperialism and have more significance for donors. Yet the impulses behind the use of participatory approaches originate in perceived limitations of 'conventional' research for embedding priorities of research impact beyond the academy. Engagement with participatory agendas encounters a different set of impulses and priorities: emancipation, empowerment, interconnectedness, social learning and a commitment to action-led research. These encounters, we suggest, are not unproductive - though the different logics governing conventional and participatory research give rise to challenges which researchers (within and outside the academy) need to be aware of and carefully navigate.

Even if the conditions are apparently optimal, much still depends greatly on the skills and quality of interpersonal interactions between the researcher and the PAR collaborators. Greater recognition needs to be given to the critical importance of the skillset of the researcher, in that it extends beyond research design principles to also encompass advanced leadership skills of diplomacy and negotiation. The influential role of professional researchers in this context seems a neglected consideration within participatory research literatures which otherwise tend to address power relations (and inequalities) among research collaborators only. At the same time, it is important to recognise that PAR approaches also involve such qualities of others involved in the research process.

This takes a greater dimension when applying PAR to policy makers which are not viewed as the 'natural' collaborators in this approach. Bringing together individuals from diverse institutions and different countries is a significant challenge also demanding an equally advanced skillset in diplomacy and negotiation as well as a commitment to what can be a time-consuming process with uncertain outcomes – not only for the individual concerned but also for the institution. In this, PAR requires advanced and specialist skills of all involved and is a potentially high risk methodology. The lack of comparable examples from which to learn could be attributed to PAR not being considered an obvious or viable method for these type of participants. However, what is clear is that PAR seeks to empower the subjects of research and, as presented in this paper, power can take on different forms, is multi-level, multi-actored, and multi-dimensional.

Moreover, there is ample scope for much better understanding how PAR in practice influences policy-makers' approach to problem solving and the pathways its use generates in effecting policy change and success. This is an on-going area of research enquiry in its own right, which, we suggest, has a strong potential to uncover key methodological issues and knowledge generation and learning on the use of PAR in diverse contexts and with diverse kinds of participants. With this in mind, several questions for on-going and future research may usefully include: How does including research participants from diverse social fields who occupy highly divergent positions of social power in the participatory research process affect the outcomes of the research? What difference does it make to the objective of social change to practise participatory approaches from the primary vantage point of democratising knowledge compared with the more instrumental versions of using participatory methods to maximise research uptake and impact? (How) can participatory researchers stay true to the emancipatory origins and objectives of PAR especially under conditions of greater pressures on institutional researchers to achieve and demonstrate research uptake and impact? Is PAR any more or less effective that 'conventional' research methodologies in terms of effecting change, and if so, what are the determinants of these differences and under what conditions are they manifested?

Finally, we conclude that using PAR to generate meaningful partnerships with policy makers and engaging with processes of 'upstream' social change and the policies that may be sources of social oppression has the potential to reframe traditional understandings of empowerment and, by extension, of what counts as 'valid' PAR. If the ultimate goal of PAR is to bring about change from the 'bottom-up', working with Southern policy-makers within an international development context in ways that give an international 'voice' to what may be marginalised perspectives is in keeping with this approach. Working with policy-makers in a participatory manner that enables social learning among diverse stakeholders bringing markedly different viewpoints may in itself lead to greater potential for positive change in addressing entrenched social problems profoundly affecting the life chances of a very significant proportion of the population.

References

Amaya, A.B., Bagapi, K., Choge, I., De Lombaerde, P., Kingah, S., Kwape, I., Luwabelwa, M., Mathala, O., Mhehe, E., Moeti, T., Mookodi, L., Ngware, Z. and Phirinyane, M. (2015) 'Monitoring Pro-Poor HealthPolicy Success in the SADC Region', PRARI Policy Brief No 7, The Open University, Milton Keynes. [available at: http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/]

Amaya, A.B., Kingah, S., and De Lombaerde, P. (2015) *Multi-level Pro-Poor Health Governance, Statistical Information Flows, and the Role of Regional Organisations in South America and Southern Africa*, PRARI Working Paper 15/1, The Open University-United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, Milton Keynes, UK.

Baum, F., MacDougall, C. and Smith, D. (2006) 'Glossary: Participatory action research', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health,* 60, 854-7.

Bergold, J. and Thomas, S. (2012) Participatory Research Methods: a methodological approach in motion, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1) Art. 30, January. [available at: http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1801.]

Buss P.M., Ferreira J.R. (2010) 'Health diplomacy and South-South cooperation: the experiences of UNASUR Salud and CPLP's strategic plan for cooperation in health', *Revista Electrônica de Comunicação, Informação & Inovação em Saúde,* 4, 98-110.

Carden, F. (2007) 'Context matters: The influence of IDRC-supported research on policy processes', in Elias T. Ayuk and Mohammed Ali Marouani (eds), *The policy paradox in Africa: Strengthening links between economic research and policymaking*, pp. 93-116. Trenton, NJ and Ottawa: Africa World Press and IDRC.

Casaburi, G., Riggirozzi, M., Tuozzo, M. and Tussie, D. (2000) 'Multilateral development banks, governments and civil society: Chiaroscuros in a triangular relationship', *Global Governance,* 6(4): 493-517.

Cornwall, A. and Jewkes, R. (1995) 'What is participatory research?', *Social Science and Medicine*, 41(12): 1667-1676.

Christopher, S., Watts, V., McCormick, A.K. and Young, S. (2008) 'Building and maintaining trust in a community-based participatory research partnership. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98, 1398-406.

De Koning, K. and Martin, M. (1996) *'Participatory Research in Health: Issues and experiences'.* London: Zed Books.

De Lombaerde, P., E. Adiwasito and G. Pietrangeli (2005), "On the Joint Assessment of Andean Integration in EU-CAN Relations", *Studia Diplomatica*, 58(3):115-143.

De Lombaerde, P. (ed.) (2006) *Assessment and Measurement of Regional Integration*, Abingdon: Routledge.

De Lombaerde, P., A. Estevadeordal and K. Suominen (eds) (2008a), *Governing Regional Integration for Development. Monitoring Experiences, Methods and Prospects*, London: Ashgate, 290 pp.

De Lombaerde, P. E. Dorrucci, G. Genna and F.P. Mongelli (2008b), "Quantitative Monitoring and Comparison of Regional Integration Processes: Steps Towards Good Practise", in: A. Kösler and M. Zimmek (eds), *Elements of Regional Integration*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp.149-179.

De Lombaerde, P., O. Guinea, G. Pietrangeli and C. Weeratunge (2010), "Systems of Indicators for Monitoring Regional Integration Processes: Where Do We Stand Anno 2010?", *Köz-Gazdaság – Economic Theory and Policy*, 5(3): 145-171.

De Lombaerde, P., R.G. Flôres Jr., P.L. Lapadre and M. Schulz (eds) (2011), *The Regional Integration Manual. Quantitative and Qualitative Methods*, London-New York: Routledge.

Eyben, R., Leon, R. and Hossain, N. (2007), 'Participatory Action Research into Donor-Recipient Relations: A case study', *Development in Practice,* 17, 167-78.

Flemes, D. (2009), 'Regional power South Africa: Co-operative hegemony constrained by historical legacy', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 27*, 135-157.

Flyverg, B. (ed.) (2001), *Making social science matter: why social inequiry fails and how it can succeed,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilson, L. (ed) (2012) '*Health policy and systems research: a methodology reader*', Alliance for health Policy and Systems Research, WHO: Geneva.

Greenwood, D., Whyte, W.F. and Harkavy, I. (1993) 'Participatory Action Research as a Process and as a Goal', *Human Relations*, 46(2): 177-89.

Hecker, R. (1997) 'Participatory action research as a strategy for empowering Aboriginal health workers', *Aust N Z J Public Health*, 21, 784-8.

IDRC/CRDI/DfID (2012) *New pathways to resilience: outcomes of the climate change adaptation in Africa research and capacity building program 2006-2012*.

Jagosh, J. et al. (2012). 'Uncovering the benefits of participatory research: implications of a realist review for health research and practice', *The Milbank Quarterly*, 90, 311-46.

Khanlou, N. and Peter, E. (2005) 'Participatory action research: considerations for ethical review', *Social Science and Medicine*, 60, 2333-40.

Mapfumo,P. Adjei-Nsiah, S., Mahoo, H. and Majule, A. (n.d.) *Enhancing Smallholders' Capacity to Cope with Climate Change*, Factsheet. Available at: http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/ClimateChange/CCAA-Ag-PAR-Fact-Sheet-Soil-Fertility.pdf.

Mapfumo, P., Adjei-Nsiah, S., Mtambanengwe, Chikowo, R., and Giller, K.E. (2013) 'Participatory action research (PAR) as an entry point for supporting climate change adaptation by smallholder farmers in Africa', *Environmental Development*, 5: 6-22.

McDonald, M. (2009) *Ethics and community-engaged research*, Duke University, Durham, USA.

Meyer, J. (2000) 'Using qualitative methods in health related action research', *BMJ,* 320: 178-81.

Pyett, P. (2002) 'Working together to reduce health inequalities: reflections on a collaborative participator approach to health research', *Aust N Z J Public Health*, 26, 332-6.

Reason, P. (1994) 'Three Approaches to Participative Inquiry', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Springett, J. and Wallerstein, N (2008) Issues in participatory evaluation. In: Minkler, M and Wallerstein, N., *Community based participatory research in health*, 2nd edn. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Tussie, D. (ed) (2009). *The politics of trade: The role of research in trade policy and negotiation,* Boston: Republic of Letters Publishing.

Van Niekerk, L. and van Niekerk, D. (2009) 'Participatory action research: Addressing social vulnerability of rural women through income-generating activities', *Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 2(2): 127-144.

Weaver, Y. and Nicholls, V. The Camden 'Alternative choices in mental health'. In: Winter, R, Munn-Giddings C, eds*. A handbook for action research in health and social care*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Zemelman, H. (2000) 'Conocimientos y sujetos sociales: contribucion al estudio del presente' 2nd edn. Centro de Estudios Sociologicos, Mexico DF: Colegio de Mexico.