ACTION RESEARCH

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Many of us are familiar with the "scientific research" process in which a question or problem is identified, data is objectively collected, a dispassionate analysis developed, ultimately leading to recommendations for someone to act on – or not. The philosophy and the techniques underpinning hard scientific research have unfortunately become the norm for research into environmental and social situations, but are not always appropriate.

Action Research offers an alternative. This is no new age challenge to the solid foundations of modern scientific thought, but is a sound and rigorous methodology for researching socio-environmental situations.

Shortcomings of Scientific Reasoning

At the root of applied scientific research is the desire to find, or improve, the means to reach some or other pre-determined goal. The process begins with identifying the "problem". A process of research and investigation is identified in order to find a "solution". With the beginning-point and end-point thus established, complex situations are reduced to their component parts so that each can be studied separately and the relationships between them analysed. Thus a model of cause and effect can be built and… voila!… the way forward is clear!

This is great when you are fixing a vacuum-cleaner or analysing a virus. But is it really an appropriate mind-set to approach situations where the key dynamic is the relationships between groups, between individuals and between people and their environment?

In a conventional "scientific research" process, both natural phenomena and people are treated as "objects" of research. The researcher is seen as somehow separated from the situation, not engaging with it, or influencing it in any way. But in reality, people are self-determining subjects – like the scientists and practitioners themselves, and cannot be studied as mere objects. Neither can the researcher claim not to influence the situation he or she is researching. Socio-environmental systems themselves are endlessly complex and scientifically constructed cause-effect models are severely limited in what they can describe.

If regarded by researchers and development workers as “objects”, people tend to develop perceptions of inequality and feelings of alienation. The researcher is seen as something "other", not part of the same universe, and the researcher's data and interpretations are treated with suspicion or disbelief. Whatever knowledge is gained through the research is gained by the researcher not the subjects. The "solutions" which emerge from the research are consequently imposed from outside, and are unsustainable. One does not need to go too far to encounter the resentment and mistrust so typical of "over-researched" communities in South Africa.

Elements of practical reasoning

While scientific reasoning may be comprehensive and rigorous in its own right, and may provide a sound basis for decision-making in certain situations, practical reasoning is what most people do, and for most of the time, this is what informs the choices we make and the actions we take. Call it gut feel or common sense, its useful to understand some of the characteristics of practical reasoning before moving on to discuss research in social situations.

Necessity: Some questions must be answered, as they are both practical and urgent. We cannot always wait for a comprehensive assessment of all the variables before making a decision. Our survival may depend on it.

Uncertainty: The grounds on which we make decisions are made are essentially uncertain. No one can know infallibly whose interests should be consulted, exactly what evidence should be taken into account, or which arguments should be given precedence.

Realities: It is seldom possible to make a "clean start". Past histories and current realities inform our choices. We all bring our "baggage" to a situation and have to take it into account.

Uniqueness: Each practical question belongs to a specific time and context. Today is different in a million ways from yesterday, from last week, from last year. Tomorrow will be different again. Precedent can inform, but cannot determine our decision.

Sacrifice: No decision or course of action leads to the perfect solution. Competing goals and values will always have to be taken into consideration. Even if an optimal solution is chosen that will result in the satisfaction of a range of needs, some will either not be satisfied, or will not be satisfied fully. Optimal decisions for the group may favour some individuals more than others.

Unpredictability: The outcomes of any decision and course of action are never entirely predictable. Even less so are the outcomes of the alternative courses of action that might have been chosen. We can never know what will happen... or what might have happened.

Ambiguity of actions: Our practical decisions are based on both on the anticipated desirability of the expected result, and on the act itself. Just as we may argue that the end justifies the means, so we may choose or choose to avoid, certain means for themselves.

Action research: A third way...

Scientific and practical reasoning both have their obvious shortcomings. Action research provides a third way. To begin with, action research requires an ethical approach that acknowledges co-responsibility for the outcomes of actions. This is not an arms-length, objective exercise. Researcher and subject both take responsibility for the unfolding future.

Secondly, there is a clear understanding that the process of research itself is a dynamic social process. Action research explores the relationship between the individual and the social, and as clarity emerges, so people act and change. As they act and change, so relationships change and new variables come into play. There may be clear direction, but there is no end-point.

Action research aims to be emancipatory. It releases people from the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination. And it is recursive. It aims to help people investigate reality in order to change it. It aims to transform both theory and practice.

The learning cycle: the core of action research

Learning is fundamental to Action Research, and learning is not the same as collecting data or "gathering" knowledge. This is a learning cycle in which both researcher and subject are intimately engaged. Elements of this learning cycle include the following:

Reflecting on the current situation

Rather than the "outsider" researcher formulating a research question, or a problem that needs examining, this is left open to the community or group. The researcher's task is to facilitate reflection on the situation the group finds itself in and to lead the group towards a deeper understanding of their situation. The researcher's role is not to limit what may emerge from the group (difficulties, available resources, group dynamics, personal histories…etc.) but merely to keep the process focused and productive.

Planning a change to improve the situation

Based on a deeper understanding of their situation, their capacities, available resources, etc., the researcher would facilitate a planning process that makes clear the actions that the group wants to take. Some of the actions may be allocated to the researcher, others to various members of the group. Planning is as detailed as it needs to be. The key is commitment.

Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change

Plans are implemented. Actions are taken and consequences are noticed... or not. Apart from those tasks specifically allocated to the researcher, his/her role is not to police the agreed plan or the actions of others, but merely to observe and understand what is emerging.

Reflection and re-planning the same, or another process of change

At any point, the group can come together and reflect on what it has seen change. These changes may be direct results of the planned action, indirect results, or simply that external conditions have changed. Whatever the external changes, there is invariably an "internal" change in the group – a change in the way the group and individuals see their circumstances.

Significant external changes may mean the plan has to be modified, and the groups deeper understanding will add to the mix.

And so on... and so on...

The learning cycle usually has a number of planning/acting/reflecting iterations, as each reflection yields new information, as the groups understanding of their situation deepens, and as the group's sense of empowerment and control over their future emerges. There is no clear end-point for the researcher, but rather an increasing sense that his/her expertise is not longer really required.

Of course, there is a lot more to it than this! We hope to bring some more insight on the subject in future editions of EPI News.