Key Points

- Action research enables PLP staff and the coalitions it supports ‘real-time’ insights into the complex, non-linear and long term change processes in which they are engaged.
- Action Research requires not only an understanding of general M&E principles, but a deep understanding of the complex interplays of social, cultural and political factors which affect development change.
- As Action Research requires ‘thinking and working politically’, for it to be effective, all parties must be equally committed to the need for flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness during the process.
- To be effective, Action Research requires a commitment to deep learning and a willingness to embrace appropriate change from research subjects.
- Action Research can be labour- and resource-intensive, but can help build trust, commitment and learning between PLP, the researcher, and the reform coalition.

Approach to Action Research

Action Research bridges the divide between theory and practice by utilising knowledge and experience as dynamic tools that not only improve understanding of specific issues, but also how this can be practically applied.

Action Research is explicitly designed to inform programming and learning-on-the-go, conducted in a collaborative and iterative manner. It operates in real-time through structured feedback loops. This leads to increased understanding of how the multiple inputs around processes, including resources, personnel and relationships, have an impact on outcomes. Feedback and knowledge is then integrated into current and future activities.
WHY ACTION RESEARCH?

PLP’s approach is informed by growing interest within the development community and sections of the Australian aid program in ‘thinking and working politically’ and a corresponding questioning of the ability of more orthodox M&E approaches to accurately capture the information they needed.

PLP’s commitment to promoting long term developmental change requires a deep-seated understanding of how change happens. Action Research provides the best opportunity for PLP to assist developmental change agents to ‘grow by learning’ by providing vital insights how change happens – or doesn’t – in the Pacific. Through this active learning, PLP can ensure that its approach to developmental problems acknowledges complexity and operates as best-practice.

Action Research is a key part of PLP’s Knowledge Strategy. It helps PLP build on its own M&E approach to focus more broadly on knowledge management and the generation and dissemination of learning.

METHODOLOGY

PLP’s Action Research program is implemented in partnership with La Trobe University’s Institute of Human Security and Social Change, and the Developmental Leadership Program. Researchers are identified based on their experience of Action Research, their contextual, language and sectoral knowledge, and their willingness to work in iterative and participatory ways. Researchers typically undertake three or four field visits a year, timed to coincide where possible with key coalition activities.

The program commenced in 2012, alongside activities of the Pacific regional Green Growth Leaders Coalition. Action Research support for other coalitions followed in 2013. Prior to commencing, a review of relevant academic and grey literature on Action Research was conducted by La Trobe University, and PLP staff were provided with internal training on the key features of this approach. PLP and La Trobe staff then developed a standardised Terms of Reference (TOR) for all Action Research activities, which would enable PLP to compare lessons learned and outcomes across different coalitions and contexts.

While containing core guiding questions and processes, the standardised TOR also provides space to incorporate the specific interests and needs of coalition members. This is essential to ensure commitment and buy-in to Action Research activities. The TOR is reviewed and reconfirmed on an annual basis by PLP, La Trobe and the coalitions. Action Research activities are overseen by PLP staff as part of their core program and activity management responsibilities. This ensures Action Research activities are mainstreamed, rather than implemented in parallel to other coalition activities.

LESSONS LEARNED

- For PLP to be effective utilisers and advocates of Action Research processes, it is imperative that PLP continues to commit to Action Research principles in its own work. Rather than seeing Action Research as being something for PLP, it should instead be incorporated within PLP to inform and guide current and future practice.
- Ongoing political will and institutional support is needed to undertake Action Research in complex political settings where there are risks associated with thinking and working politically.
- An understanding of the nature of Action Research is required by all parties. Of equal importance is identifying suitable Action Research projects, personnel to undertake the work and appropriate management and M&E processes to oversee the triangular relationships that develop between the implementing organisation, partner and Action Researcher.
- Trust and access between the Action Researcher, partner and funder is required, however this cannot be guaranteed. This poses a potential dilemma as a lack of trust between the parties may hinder the Action Researcher’s ability to conduct research with sufficient independence and vigour, as well as the likelihood of the partners not engaging fully with the research and funders potentially ignoring the results and recommendations.
- The independence of the Action Researcher is essential to developing a positive collaborative relationship and perceptions of bias of capture need to be carefully managed.
- A commitment to flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness by all participants is needed to keep pace with Action Research. Regular planning, debriefing and reporting are essential to ensure that differences of opinion are aired and resolved and expectations remain as aligned as possible.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Action Research holds significant promise for ensuring program effectiveness and contributing to the learning of practitioners, academics and policy-makers. To be effective, however, it is critical that the following conditions are in place:

- All parties must have an understanding of the context and purpose of the research and commitment to full and honest engagement with Action Research processes.
- Programs like PLP must provide support in coordinating aspects of research and ensuring all relevant information is accessible to the researcher, whilst remaining at arm’s length from the investigative process to promote the likelihood of objective findings.
- A commitment to learning and adaptability from all parties, most notably development agency staff and donors, based not just on the findings of the Action Research, but being informed by the processes of reflexivity and transparency. In particular, donors should see Action Research as a valuable tool for ensuring program objectives are met even if this means altering inputs and outputs.

For further information on PLP, visit www.plp.org.fj or contact Georgina Cope (PLP Team Leader) on georgina.cope@plp.org.fj