Where, how, and why are Action Research approaches used by international development non-governmental organisations?

Rowan Popplewell and Rachel Hayman, September 2012

Action Research approaches are widely used by international development NGOs, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that they are becoming increasingly popular. However, we still know remarkably little about where, how, and why international development NGOs use Action Research. Within the existing academic literature on Action Research, there is no consistent analysis of the use of Action Research approaches in the field of international development, despite the fact that Action Research is closely associated with well-known methods and renowned thinkers within development studies. The practical experiences of development NGOs in using the approaches likewise do not feature very highly. This raises questions about whether Action Research is being used appropriately and well, and what collectively international development NGOs could contribute towards the theory and further development of Action Research approaches.

To take a small step towards addressing this gap, and to encourage the broader sharing of experiences of using Action Research in international development, this paper provides an introduction to the debate. It explores Action Research approaches in greater depth and looks at some of the possible and existing applications by international development NGOs. It then discusses some of the practical challenges NGOs face when using these approaches and issues surrounding the quality and rigor of Action Research. Finally, it asks critical questions about the use of Action Research approaches by international development NGOs, with a view to stimulating further discussion and reflection on this issue.

1. What is Action Research?

1.1 Defining Action Research

Action Research is a label that covers a broad family of approaches to carrying out research that share similar characteristics: they are typically values-based, action-oriented and participatory. First, 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. Action can mean anything from changing or improving practices and finding practical solutions to problems, to challenging power relations within communities. Finally, Action Research approaches are participatory; they involve a collective process of knowledge generation and ultimately aim to democratise this process. Reason and Bradbury 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.[1]

1.2 Origins of Action Research

Action Research has not emerged from a single academic discipline. Rather, 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.[2]

Kurt Lewin is regarded as the founder of Action Research, coining the term in 1944 and developing the central process that forms the methodological foundation of the majority of Action Research approaches today.[3] Other prominent theorists that have contributed significantly to the development of Action Research approaches include Paolo Freire[4] and Robert Chambers.[5]

1.3 A broad family of approaches

Action Research covers a constantly evolving family of approaches. Consequently, there is confusion over just how many variants exist. Chandler and Torbert have identified at least 27 different "*flavors*" or "*modes*" of Action Research, yet even this figure is unlikely to represent the totality of Action Research approaches.[6]

Commonly 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. Three of the most widely known are Classical Action Research, Action Learning and PAR:

- **Classical Action Research** involves researchers and participants working together to identify and solve problems often within an organisational context, and generate new knowledge by engaging in collaborative cycles of planning, taking and evaluating action.[7]
- **Action Learning** is concerned with facilitating either organisational or individual learning, typically within an organisational context. In Action Learning, participants and researchers learn from their actions and experiences and implement changes to organisational and individual practices based on their learning.
- **Participatory Action Research** differs from Classical Action Research and Action Learning in that it typically takes place outside of the organisational context.[8] PAR aims to

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[1] Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: SAGE, pp. 1

[2] Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., and Maguire, P. (2003) 'Why Action Research?' in *Action Research* 1(1)

[3] Lewin, K. (1946) 'Action Research and Minority Problems' in *Journal of Social Issues* 2(4)

[4] Freire, P. (1976) *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.

[5] Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications

[6] Chandler, D. and Torbert, B. (2003) 'Transforming inquiry and action: Interweaving 27 flavors of action research' in *Action Research* 1(2)

[7] Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2010) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, London: SAGE.

[8] Coghlan and Brannick (2010)

democratise the knowledge generation process through directly including marginalised and vulnerable groups throughout all stages of the research process.[9]

However, in practice Action Researchers rarely use an existing approach unchanged. Many Action Researchers alter an existing approach or pick and mix elements from a range of approaches to create an entirely new variant that is more suited to the context, objectives and questions of their research. This also raises the possibility that some practitioners may be doing 'Action Research' without referring to it as such, complicating the picture further.

1.4 Theoretical foundations of Action Research

All Action Research approaches have common ontological and epistemological foundations. Action Research approaches share the same ontology or theory of being. While in conventional social science, the researcher strives to be objective, Action Researchers are inherently subjective; they are value laden and morally committed and promote a specific conception of human wellbeing through their research.[10]

Just as Action Research approaches share ontological foundations, they also share a similar epistemology or theory of knowledge, that is, what can be known and how it has come to be known. Action Researchers believe that knowledge is socially constructed and plural.[11] They highlight the importance of reflexivity in the production of knowledge; good Action Researchers should continually question what they think they know, their approach, the choices they make during the research process[12], their findings, and what they do with their findings.[13]

Consequently, Action Research approaches are typically regarded as interpretive as opposed to positivist. Indeed many Action Researchers are highly critical of the conventional positivist approach to social science and its core tenet, objectivism. Positivist social scientists argue that for research to be credible it must be objective and value free. However many Action Researchers regard scientific objectivity as a myth, believing all research is embedded within a specific values-system.[14] Other Action Researchers caution against pitting Action Research and positivism against each other. Rather, they believe that Action Research complements conventional approaches to social science and researchers should appreciate what each paradigm has to offer.[15]

In practice, researchers may use positivist methods to complement Action Research approaches and vice versa. Individual Action Research projects may include elements more commonly associated with positivism in their design (for example, the use of hypotheses or methodological tools such as randomised control trials), and more conventional research projects may use elements more commonly associated with Action Research. According to Burns et al, how and to what ends methods are used matters more than the choice of specific methods themselves:

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[9] Kindon, S., Pain, R., and Kesby, M. (2007) 'Participatory Action Research: Origins, approaches and methods' in Kindon, S., Pain, R., and Kesby, M. (eds.) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting people, participation and place*, London: Routeledge.
[10] McNiff, J., and Whitehead, J. (2011) *All You Need To Know About Action Research*, Los Angeles: SAGE.
[11] Hinchey, P. (2008) *Action Research Primer*, New York: Peter Lang.
[12] Reason, P. (2006) 'Choice and Quality in Action Research Practice' in *Journal of Management Inquiry* 15(2)
[13] Coghlan and Brannick (2010); McNiff and Whitehead (2011)
[14] Brydon-Miller et al. (2003)
[15] Bradbury-Huang, H. (2010) 'What is good Action Research?: Why the resurgent interest?' in *Action Research* 8(1)

"*traditional research methods can be powerful tools in the service of social change, and participatory methods can be co-opted and used instrumentally to reinforce the status quo*".[16] Indeed, mixed methods approaches are becoming increasingly common within international development research and are favoured by many organisations, individual researchers and research funders.

1.5 Methodological foundations of Action Research

There is debate within the Action Research community as to whether or not Action Research constitutes a research methodology. Some believe that it is a research methodology in the conventional sense, some that it constitutes a meta-methodology within which a range of methods might be used, while others argue that it is not a methodology but a broader approach to conducting social research.[17] This paper adopts the position that Action Research is a label that covers a broad range of approaches to social research, many of which share similar methodological components or foundations.

Most Action Research is practitioner focused – either led by or conducted in close collaboration with practitioners – and highly participatory, with participants involved at all stages of the research process.[18] These two principles form the methodological foundations of nearly all Action Research approaches.

Further, most Action Research approaches use a variant of a methodological process known as the Action Research Cycle (see Figure 1), which was originally developed by Kurt Lewin in the mid-1940s. This is essentially a cycle with three steps: planning action, taking action and evaluating action, which is repeated throughout the research process. Coghlan and Brannick use a four-step cycle that has one pre-step, which unlike the others is not repeated throughout the research (see Figure 2).[19] Here, Action Researchers first establish the context and purpose of the research and form

Figure 1: Action Research cycle

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. According to Coghlan and Brannick, Action Research projects often use two cycles: a "*core action research cycle*", which refers to the aims or content of the research project and a "*thesis action research cycle*" or "*meta-learning cycle*", which relates to how the project itself is going.[20]
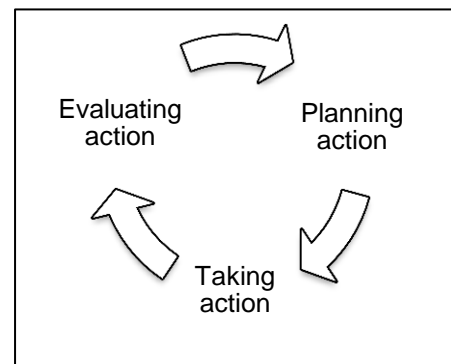
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[16] Burns, D., Harvey, B., and Ortiz Aragon, A. (2012) 'Introduction: Action Research for Development and Social Change' in *IDS Bulletin* 43(3) p. 4
[17] Burns et al. (2012)
[18] Bradbury-Huang (2010)
[19] Coghlan and Brannick (2010)
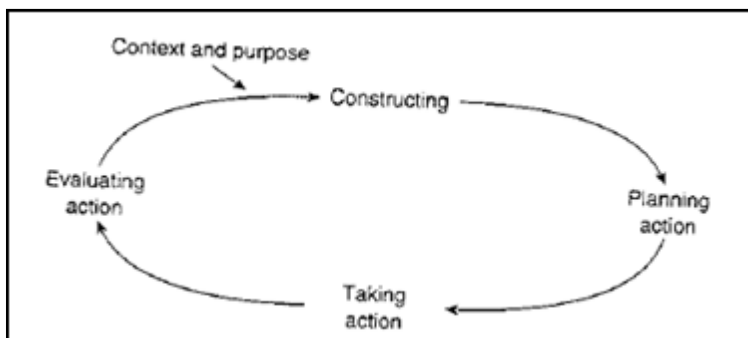[20] Coghlan and Brannick (2010)

Figure 2: Action Research cycle by Coghlan and Brannick (2010)

While most Action Research projects do use Action Research cycles to some degree, a number of Action Researchers have challenged their linearity.[21] They argue that sequential cycles of planning, acting and evaluating represent a linear reasoning process similar to those used in conventional social research. In practice the research process is unlikely to follow these neat, sequential cycles but is "*likely to be more fluid, open and responsive*".[22] This is something that Action Researchers should be mindful of when designing and implementing their research.

2. What is Action Research used for in NGOs?

Action Research approaches have a number of possible and existing applications in international development, including organisational learning and evaluation. For each of these applications, Action Research approaches can be used on their own or in conjunction with other research approaches including positivist approaches and methods.

2.1 Organisational learning

The nature of Action Research approaches mean they are seen by many NGOs as being particularly well suited to facilitating and promoting organisational learning. This is particularly the case for Action Learning, or Experiential Learning as it is sometimes called.

In Action Learning approaches, researchers and practitioners jointly engage in cycles of planning, acting, reflecting and learning (see Figure 3).[23] However, the conventional learning process is reversed: instead of an individual learning something, banking it and then applying what they have learnt, individuals study, analyse and evaluate their actions and experiences and then learn from them. Action Learning is attractive to many NGOs as it allows practitioners to learn from existing practices and interventions, and links organisational and individual learning with the improvement of these practices and interventions.

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[21] Burns et al. (2012)
[22] Kemmis and McTaggart (2007) p. 277 in Burns et al. (2012) p. 6
[23] Buijs, P., Aarnoudse, A., Geers, C., Agbenyadzi, E., Kuma, A., and Doppenberg, A.M. (2012) 'The Jigsaw of Mayor Clement: Stories and lessons from an action learning programme in West Africa' *Praxis Note No. 61*, Oxford: INTRAC.
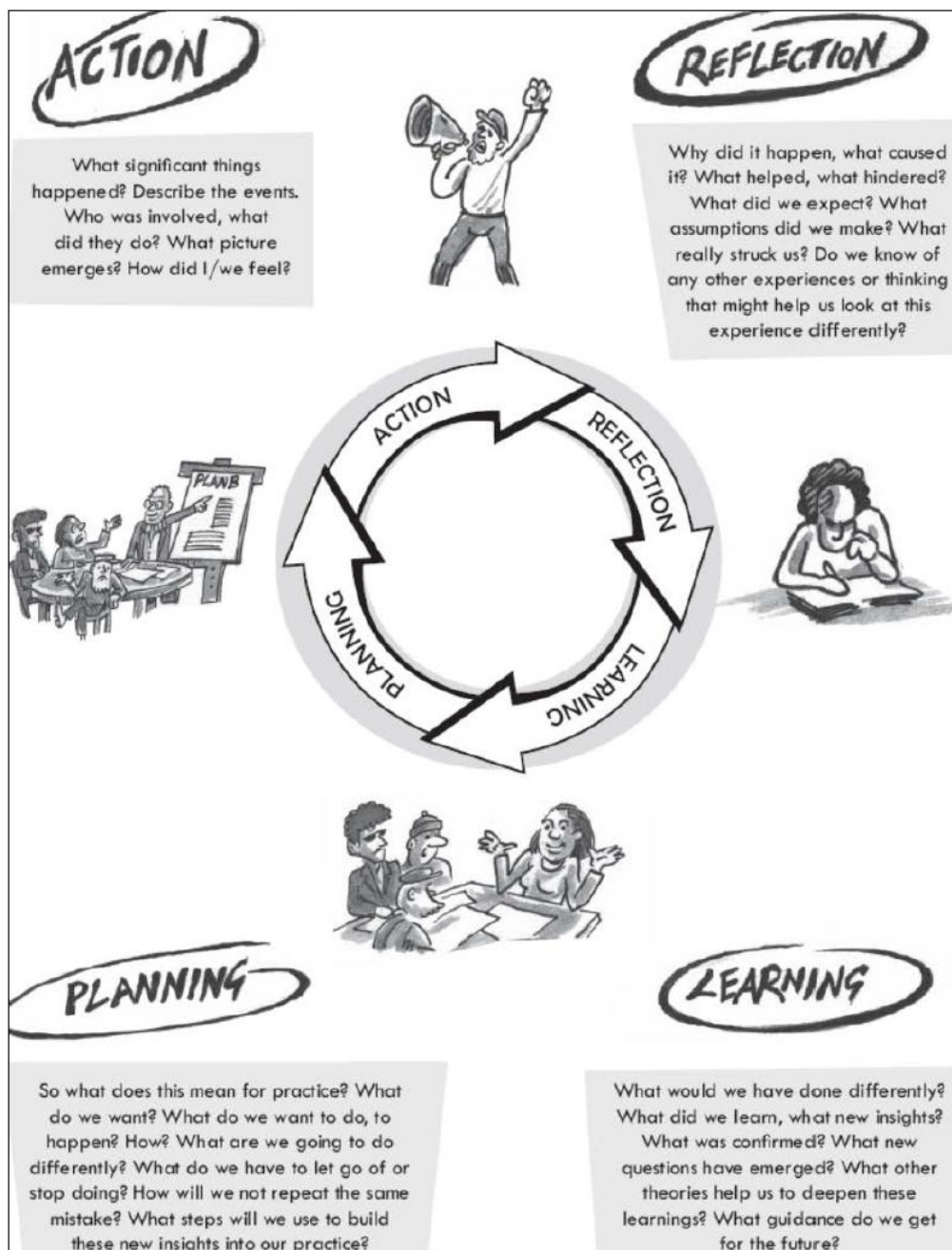
Figure 3: Action Learning cycle from Buijs et al. (2012)

As with the Action Research cycle above, the obvious critique here is that learning is unlikely to occur in the linear or sequential manner portrayed in Action Learning cycles. As Pettit argues, learning is likely to be "*layered, emergent and iterative, with participants making sense of their experiences in different ways at different times*".[24] While Action Learning cycles look neat on paper, in reality people learn at their own speeds and in their own ways, something that is likely to complicate collaborative learning processes.

Action Research also creates spaces for reflexivity, which is essential for supporting individual and organisational learning. Reflexivity is promoted in Action Research through the Action Research cycle and through tools such as reflective diaries or journals, through which

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[24] Barefoot Collective, *Barefoot Guide to Working With Organisations and Social Change*, 2009. Pg. 110

researchers and practitioners are encouraged to reflect on their actions and experience. However, Argyris and Schön argue that this reflection needs to go further than what they refer to as 'single loop learning' where practitioners question and correct their practices within the existing rules, to 'double loop learning' where practitioners question the norms and assumptions that frame their practices.[25] Consequently, double loop learning has the potential to support organisations to question the core of what it is they do and the assumptions that drive their work, and set new priorities and strategies accordingly.

2.2 Evaluation

Action Research approaches are favoured by some practitioners as an approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and Impact Evaluation because their participatory nature means they are more likely to generate ownership of the evaluation, and support the retention of learning, facilitate downward accountability, and promote in-depth understanding of local communities and contexts, than conventional approaches to evaluation.

The participatory nature of Action Research approaches means that participants are more likely to have ownership over an evaluation, and retain knowledge and learning generated by evaluations within organisations and potentially even local communities. Many evaluations conducted using conventional approaches can be highly extractive, with external evaluators mining data, knowledge and learning from organisations and communities for the purposes of evaluation and failing to feed back their findings to those being evaluated in an accessible and useful manner. In Action Research, stakeholders are more likely to be included in the evaluation in a manner that supports their full and meaningful participation, and therefore the ownership and the retention of knowledge within these organisations and communities.

As a result of their highly participatory nature, Action Research approaches also 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 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 a 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). The challenge for Action Researchers is to adequately balance the demands and requirements of all stakeholders, something that many struggle with in practice.

Further, Action Research approaches to evaluation can provide in-depth understanding of local communities and their experiences, opinions and understanding of a particular development project, programme or intervention. Such in-depth knowledge is important because it can help to improve the quality of evaluations, particularly the validity of evaluations, i.e. it helps evaluators ensure that they are actually measuring what they think they are measuring.[26] This is particularly the case with impact evaluations, which aim to evaluate the impact of a specific project,

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[25] Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1974) *Theory in Practice: Increasing Organisational Effectiveness*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
[26] Stern, E., Stame, N., Mayne, J., Forss, K., Davies, R., and Befani, B. (2012) 'Broadening the Range of Designs and Methods for Impact Evaluations: Report of a study commissioned by the Department for International Development' *Working Paper 38*, London: Department for International Development.

programme or intervention. Participatory approaches to impact evaluation can boost the claims to causality between a given intervention and a given outcome through providing validation by participants that their actions or the experienced effects are caused by that programme or intervention.[27] Capturing and taking into consideration the views and opinions of participants in a meaningful way not only provides in-depth understanding of whether, why and how an intervention impacts local communities, it may also lend both the process and findings of an impact evaluation added legitimacy.

3. Positionality, participation and publishing: dealing with the big challenges

Action Researchers face several challenges when it comes to doing it right, doing it well and making the most of the research. These include getting to grips with the position of the Action Researcher, which can raise a number of practical issues; ensuring full and meaningful participation throughout the research process; and scaling up the research in terms of producing theory and knowledge.

3.1 The position of the researcher

Action Research is grounded in reflexivity and self-awareness. The Action Researcher has first and foremost to come to terms with their position. This is particularly crucial for the 'insider' Action Researcher, that is, a researcher who is conducting research on or within the organisation that they work or volunteer for. This is often the case in Action Research involving international development NGOs, particularly those using classical Action Research or Action Learning approaches.

The Action Researcher, particularly an insider Action Researcher, faces role duality; they are both a staff member or volunteer and a researcher. These roles are flexible and permeable; an Action Researcher can shift from one to the other or may be physically in one role and mentally in another.[28] It can be difficult for an Action Researcher to manage these dual roles. It may also set Action Researchers apart from their colleagues and create tensions with others within the organisation.

Negotiating access is another practical issue faced by many Action Researchers. All researchers conducting research in an organisational context need to negotiate access to that organisation. Insider researchers will already have primary access to the organisation by virtue of their position as either a staff member or volunteer, something that an outside researcher would need to negotiate first. However, even insider researchers still have to negotiate secondary access. Membership of an organisation, particularly if the researcher is a junior staff member or volunteer, may actually make it more difficult to negotiate access to tiers of the organisation that an external researcher may be able to access.[29]

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[27] Stern et al. (2012)
[28] Coghlan and Brannick (2010)
[29] Coghlan and Brannick (2010)

Action Researchers must also be aware of their position in the systems they are trying to change (this could be an organisation, programme, project or community) and the potential impact this might have on power relations within this system. Action Researchers are typically embedded in the systems they are trying to change and alter. Consequently, they must not only consider power relations within the systems they are engaging with during their research, they must also be aware of how their own position within these systems impacts on systemic power relations.[30] In other words, Action Researchers are not neutral actors; their position and how they act and behave is likely to have an impact on power relations in the communities or systems they are researching. Consequently, Action Researchers must be aware of and acknowledge this throughout their research.

3.2 Ensuring full and meaningful participation

Arguably one of the most important issues for producing quality Action Research is that of participation. Participation is integral to Action Research, yet is extremely challenging, particularly in the context of international development.

First, the time intensive nature of Action Research may make ensuring full and meaningful participation difficult. Action Research requires a great deal of input from a wide range of staff and other stakeholders, often in addition to their existing work and other commitments, who therefore may struggle to give sufficient time to the research.

Secondly, Action Researchers working within international development NGOs may find it particularly difficult to include participants (especially field staff, local partners and beneficiaries) in the initial stages of their research – in Coghlan and Brannick's terminology, the 'pre-step' where Action Researchers establish the context and purpose of the research (See Figure 2). Reasons for this can range from the practical (such as the geographical remoteness of partners, field staff and beneficiaries or their physical distance from head office) and the technical (such as poor access to the internet or lack of communication equipment), to the procedural (such as lack of budget or too tight a timeframe) and the political (such as lack of education or local power relations). Another reason for failing to include participants in the initial stages of a research project might be that participants themselves choose not to participate, either because they may initially lack faith in the value of the research or may not see how it either relates to or benefits them (See Box 1).

One of the possible consequences of this is that Action Research-oriented projects and evaluations may initially be driven by top-down demands (from upward actors such as organisational management, head office staff and donors) rather than bottom-up demands (from downward actors such as local staff, local partners, beneficiaries and communities). However this problem is not just restricted to the initial stages of a research project; Action Researchers also often have to manage multiple and competing demands throughout the research process. Consequently, Action Researchers must be careful to balance top-down and bottom-up demands and ensure full and meaningful participation at all stages of the research process.

Finally, the use of participatory approaches in international development has been subject to widespread criticism, particularly the co-optation and institutionalisation of the concept by large international development institutions such as the World Bank in the 1990s and early 2000s.[31]

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[30] Burns et al. (2012)
[31] Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, London: Zed Books.

The institutionalisation of participation by these organisations meant participation became an instrument of the powerful rather than the powerless, and its co-optation resulted in participatory methods being used to reinforce rather than challenge existing power relations.[32] This is because many of the large international development organisations and even many NGOs that use participatory language and methods, themselves remain undemocratic and hierarchical.[33] Action Researchers must be aware of these critiques and should guard against the co-optation of their own research. According to Brydon-Miller et al. one way of doing this is through continually asking "*who actually participates and for whose purposes? Whose practices are targeted for improvement? How are inequitable power relations actually unsettled and rearranged?*"[34]

Box 1: ICCO Alliance's experience of Action Learning

The ICCO Alliance is an inter-church organisation for development cooperation based in the Netherlands. The ICCO Alliance is currently implementing two Action Learning projects: one investigating the impact of the organisation's programmatic approach, and one researching the issue of power in multi-stakeholder processes. ICCO Alliance aims to involve their partner organisations in all aspects of knowledge generation and learning processes, and encourages their partner organisations to involve their beneficiaries in their own learning processes. The aim is to learn *with* others rather than *about* others. Consequently, Action Learning has become a preferred research approach within ICCO Alliance. In both projects, Action Learning was selected by ICCO staff because of its emphasis on learning.

In both projects ICCO Alliance developed its own research approach rather than using an established Action Research approach. For example, in the project looking at the organisation's programmatic approach, ICCO Alliance chose to use hypotheses to inform their research, something that is unusual in Action Research. These hypotheses were then translated into lines of inquiry and learning questions. While ICCO Alliance aimed to include participants at all stages throughout the research processes this was often not possible and it was difficult to ensure that the research was driven by bottom-up demands, particularly at the initial planning stages. ICCO Alliance aims to ensure that participants are included as research *subjects* rather than *objects*, yet in both these cases, this was not achieved until researchers visited the field sites. Only after the arrival of the Action Researchers in the field did participants become subjects in the Action Learning process and 'make it their own'. Action Researchers also found that participants were often overburdened with their own organisational activities and found it difficult to devote sufficient time to the Action Learning process. However once the participants became aware of the potential benefits of engagement, the depth and breadth of participation in the projects increased. Although neither Action Learning project was driven by bottom-up demands at the start, they became more driven by bottom-up demands as levels of participation rose throughout the research process.

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[32] Gaventa, J. and Cornwall, A. (2001) 'Power and Knowledge' in Reason and Bradbury (eds.) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: SAGE.
[33] Brydon-Miller et al. (2003)
[34] Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) p. 25

3.3 From practical application to theory building and publication

While Action Research approaches are frequently used among international development NGOs for improving practices, organisational learning and evaluation, Action Research is also a means of generating new knowledge and theories. The production of knowledge and theory are important aspects of Action Research, and can be neglected by some Action Researchers, particularly those based in international development NGOs because they are so focussed on practice and action. This neglect is reinforced by the Action Research literature. According to McNiff and Whitehead, the existing literature on Action Research is "*less about improving learning as the basis of improved practice and even less about how this should be seen as new theory and an important contribution to the world of ideas*".[35] They argue that the failure to produce theory reinforces the characterisation of practitioners as 'doers' rather than thinkers, a characterisation that in turn reinforces the divide between research and practice and further devalues practitioner knowledge.

Action Research produces a specific kind of knowledge and therefore produces a specific type of theory, which McNiff and Whitehead call "*living theories*".[36] These are theories about how practitioner learning has either improved practice or is contributing to new practices for themselves and others.[37] They argue that practitioners' 'living theories' are just as valuable and significant as other theories and that "*there should be enough room for both kinds, and discussions about how one can contribute to the development of the other*"[38]. However this is not the only type of theory Action Research produces. Action Research set outside the organisational context can be used to build or contribute to theories about a wide range of social issues, not just organisational and individual practices.

As well as producing new knowledge and theory, it is also important that Action Researchers publish their work. While there are a number of specialist peer-reviewed journals that Action Researchers can submit their findings to, many Action Researchers based in NGOs do not publish their findings in these journals.[39] This could be for a number of reasons:

- The aims of the project are internal, such as organisational learning or the improvement of internal practices rather than wider knowledge generation, sharing and dissemination
- Practitioners may not recognise the wider relevance or significance of the research conducted within their own organisation for others
- Practitioners may be unwilling to share their findings, particularly if they are critical of the organisation they work for or reflect the organisation's work in a negative light
- Practitioners may lack the ability, skills, capacity and support to publish their findings.

Sharing and publishing findings and submitting them for peer review should be as important to Action Researchers as other research outputs (organisational learning, improved practices, sustainable change, etc.). If publication is regarded as a research output, it may encourage Action Researchers to see knowledge production and theory building as an equally important outcome to change and learning. Publication also enables Action Researchers to share their findings with others, thereby potentially increasing the impact of their work and supporting

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[35] McNiff and Whitehead (2011) p. 1
[36] McNiff and Whitehead (2011) p. 12
[37] McNiff and Whitehead (2011)
[38] McNiff and Whitehead (2011) p. 2
[39] Peer-reviewed journals specifically tailored to the review and publication of Action Research include *Action Research*, *Research in Action* and *The International Journal of Action Research*.

sector-wide learning. Further, it will also help to narrow the gap identified between research and practice, identified by McNiff and Whitehead. Consequently, provisions should be made to support Action Researchers within NGOs to publish and share their work more widely.

4. Facing up to the big critiques: ensuring quality and rigor

Participatory research approaches have always come under fire from the more traditional social sciences, critiqued for lacking rigor, validity and generalizability. Action Research approaches face the same issues and Action Researchers need to engage with these criticisms, particularly if they are seeking external funding for their project or are using Action Research as part of evaluation processes.

4.1 Establishing validity in Action Research

Research validity refers to whether the research findings really are about what they say they are about. According to Whitehead and McNiff validity concerns "*establishing the truth value, or trustworthiness, of a claim to knowledge*" and the process of establishing research validity "*is about explaining why a claim to knowledge should be taken seriously*".[40] For Action Researchers, establishing and demonstrating the validity of their research involves making knowledge claims about what they have come to know through studying their practice or action, critically examining these claims against the available evidence, and involving others throughout the validation process.[41]

Researchers sometimes make a distinction between internal and external validity. Internal validity involves the researcher demonstrating the validity of their research to themself and their research team, whereas external validity involves demonstrating it to others outside of the project, including their organisation, their peers and the wider public.

Internal validity can be established through the use of tools such as triangulation (the use of more than one method or source to cross check findings) and journal writing, where the researcher keeps a research journal throughout the duration of the research process to encourage reflexivity.[42] The ability and willingness of the researcher to exercise reflexivity and critique themself is integral to ensuring research validity in Action Research. However many researchers and practitioners are either not used to systematically exercising reflexivity or lack the time and space to do so. Reflexivity is a skill that must be learnt and practiced by Action Researchers if they are to ensure the quality and rigor of their research.

External validity can be established in a number of ways, including some of the methods outlined above such as triangulation. One way favoured by many Action Researchers is through the use of validation meetings. These are regular formal meetings with a group of external actors where the researcher is questioned critically about their research methods, practices and processes in order to establish external validity.[43] Another tool for establishing external validity is the use of conventional peer review mechanisms. As mentioned above, many Action Researchers working in international development NGOs either do not publish the findings of their Action Research or

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[40] Whitehead, J. and McNiff, J. (2006) *Action Research: Living Theory*, London: SAGE, pp.97-98
[41] McNiff, J. Lomax, P. and Whitehead, J. (2003) *You and your Action Research Project*, London: Routeledge.
[42] Whitehead and McNiff (2006); McNiff and Whitehead (2011)
[43] Whitehead and McNiff (2006)

only publish them internally. In both cases, the research findings are unlikely to be subject to peer review – an important and well-established mechanism for ensuring the quality of research.

4.2 Research generalizability and Action Research

Generalizability refers to the ability to repeat or generalise the research findings within and outside of the specific context being researched. Action Research is often criticised for lacking generalizability and there is debate even within the Action Research community as to whether this criticism is valid or not.

Bradbury-Huang argues that this criticism is valid because Action Research involves the "*accumulation of local knowledge*" and establishing generalizability often asks too much of local knowledge and case study based research.[44] Brydon-Miller et al. agree, arguing that the localism of Action Research is a weakness, and often makes it difficult for Action Researchers to up-scale or apply their findings elsewhere.[45]

However, others navigate these critiques through differentiating between internal and external generalizability.[46] Costello argues that many Action Researchers may not seek external generalizability and "*therefore it is unwarranted to criticise a piece of research in terms of its lack of generalizability when this is neither a stated goal for the work being conducted, nor an explicit intention of the researcher that carries it out*".[47] As long as a researcher can establish internal generalizability – they can repeat their research findings within the setting they are researching – this should be sufficient for ensuring the quality and rigor of Action Research.

4.3 Alternative indicators of quality and rigor

Some Action Researchers argue that Action Research should not be judged against conventional criteria such as validity and generalizability, as these are not suitable indicators for establishing the quality and rigor of Action Research. Rather, they argue that Action Research should be judged by its own criteria, including: the quality of the collaboration between researcher and participants; exercising reflexivity and transparency over the choices made throughout the research process; and the contribution of the research to sustainable change.[48] Coghlan and Brannick recognise that all these issues are important but, for them, good Action Research is: the ability to tell "*a good story*" (e.g. explain what happened); provide "*rigorous reflection on that story*" (e.g. provide a good explanation of how you made sense of what happened); and "*an extrapolation of usable knowledge or theory from the reflection on the story*" (e.g. providing a good answer to the 'so what' question).[49]

While alternative indicators such as collaboration, reflexivity, transparency and the sustainability of change are extremely useful, confidence that the research findings really are about what they say they are about will help Action Researchers instigate action and social change that is relevant, and that addresses the genuine concerns of the people and communities they are

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[44] Bradbury-Huang (2010) p. 105
[45] Brydon-Miller et al. (2003)
[46] Costello, P, (2011) *Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice*, London: Continuum.
[47] Costello (2011) p. 56
[48] Coghlan and Brannick (2010); Reason (2006)
[49] Coghlan and Brannick (2010) p. 15

seeking to help. The ability to demonstrate quality and rigor through the use of conventional indicators such as validity and generalizability may also be important if Action Researchers are seeking external funding for their research from research councils, trusts, foundations or bilateral donors, where funding boards may only fund what *they* regard as high quality research. It is also important when using Action Research for evaluation purposes. Action Researchers should therefore seek to ensure that their research meets both conventional and alternative quality criteria, or at the very least be mindful of both sets of these criteria when designing and implementing the research.

5. Conclusion: addressing the gaps in our knowledge about Action Research approaches used by NGOs?

We know that Action Research approaches are used by international development NGOs for a wide range of purposes, including organisational and individual learning; monitoring and evaluation and impact evaluation; and research and theory building. We also know that Action Researchers in NGOs can face a number of practical issues and challenges, such as ensuring full and meaningful participation, and that there are issues relating to the quality and rigor of Action Research. However, despite these challenges and the significant critiques they raise – particularly those around participation and rigor – from what we know about Action Research approaches and their use by international development NGOs it can be argued that they have intrinsic value for these organisations. This is because, in comparison to more conventional social research approaches, Action Research approaches:

- **Are more participatory**: The participatory nature of these approaches may make them particularly suitable for use by international development NGOs, particularly those that seek to empower local communities and challenge dominant power relations through their work. However, this is not guaranteed; many Action Researchers struggle to ensure full and meaningful participation and as a result many projects are still driven by top-down rather than bottom-up demands.
- **Create space for learning and reflexivity:** Many international development organisations and practitioners lack the space to reflect on their practices and experiences and translate this thinking into learning, research and theory building. Action Research approaches are more likely to support these processes than conventional approaches.
- **Are less extractive:** Compared to conventional approaches to social research and evaluation, Action Research can be less extractive and has the potential to support ownership and retention of knowledge and learning generated as a result of the research among participants and local communities.
- **Support downward accountability:** Action research approaches have the potential to facilitate downward accountability to participants and beneficiaries as well as upward accountability to donors and senior organisational management. However this is dependent on the quality of participation: if participation is tokenistic or the project is driven by top down rather than bottom up demands this will not happen.
- **Can cope with complexity:** Action Research approaches may be particularly suitable for coping with complexity.[50] International development issues are often complex, as are

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[50] Burns et al. (2012); James, E.A., Slater, T., and Bucknam, A. (2011) *Action Research for Businesses, Non-Profit and Public Administration: A Tool for Complex Times*, London: SAGE.

the contexts within which many international development NGOs work. Action Research approaches may be helpful for those wishing to research these situations as they 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.[51]

However, is this really why international development NGOs and practitioners choose Action Research approaches over more conventional approaches to research and evaluation? Do organisations select Action Research because it is the most appropriate approach for the context being studied? Is it because the values of Action Research match the organisation's values or approach to international development? Or is it simply because they are fashionable? These questions themselves prompt further questions and suggest some possible lines of inquiry. More empirical data is required to assess the appropriateness of Action Research approaches, including an analysis of when and where Action Research constitutes an appropriate research methodology and when it does not. It also needs to be clearer what the motivations are behind the selection of particular Action Research methods, and whether the reasons behind selecting Action Research have an impact on the research itself e.g. make it more or less participatory.

This paper also raises questions about how Action Research approaches are used by NGOs in practice in international development research. Do NGOs simply use an existing Action Research approach or method, or are NGOs experimenting and creating their own approaches and methodologies? How far can NGOs innovate and experiment and still call what they are doing Action Research? How do those using Action Research in international development confront crucial questions specific to this field, such as participation across massive space, skills and linguistic divides? What knowledge and skills do international development NGOs and practitioners need to do Action Research and do they have them? Do Action Researchers ask themselves the crucial reflexive questions, particularly when planning, designing, implementing and evaluating their research? And what lessons are being learnt that could and should be shared with the Action Research scholars in other fields?

If the anecdotal evidence is correct and Action Research approaches are increasing in popularity among international development NGOs, then it is important that NGOs learn from the experiences of others who have used similar approaches in the same field. Analysis needs to go beyond the substance of the topic being analysed or evaluated, and also explain and critique the methods used. NGOs further need to open up their Action Research methods to scrutiny in order to provide a response to questions of quality, rigour and robustness.

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[51] James et al. (2011)

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