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Overcoming the participation challenge: ICCO Cooperation's experiences of conducting Action Research

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Considering the findings of Action Research in Burkina Faso

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Introduction

ICCO Cooperation strongly believes that knowledge generation should be a participatory process that supports social change and learning. Consequently, Action Research – a participatory, democratic process where stakeholders collaborate in the analysis of real-life problems and develop practical solutions – represents a natural choice for ICCO, as opposed to more conventional research methods.

ICCO has recently completed two very different Action Research projects. The first was an internal project that sought to investigate organisational change processes within ICCO, whereas the second looked at the issue of power in multi-stakeholder processes and was undertaken in collaboration with a number of other organisations. However, ICCO encountered similar practical issues in both projects, particularly around the quality of participation in and ownership of the Action Research. This paper reflects on these issues and outlines some thoughts and lessons that might be of use for other international development practitioners and researchers planning on undertaking Action Research.

What does ICCO mean by Action Research?

There are many definitions and types of Action Research. For ICCO, Action Research is where stakeholders engage in a highly participatory and collaborative research process that seeks to interpret and give meaning to stakeholders' own experiences and realities, and ultimately leads to social change. Through Action Research, ICCO aims to both increase and democratise understandings of what is happening in a given situation and how to improve it so that objectives of social change can be jointly realised.

ICCO Cooperation

ICCO is the interchurch cooperative for development cooperation in the Netherlands. ICCO connects enterprising people in the Netherlands with people in 44 developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This involves working closely with local civil society organisations including educational institutions and businesses. ICCO's member organisations are Edukans, Kerk in Actie and Prisma. For more information visit www.icco-international.com

ICCO appreciates and acknowledges that this is a highly subjective process. Therefore, Action Research is different to conventional research processes, which stress the importance of objectivity, and have very different understandings of quality and rigor. Whereas the quality of conventional research is judged in terms of its validity and generalisability, ICCO believes that Action Research should be judged by its own criteria, namely the quality of stakeholder's participation in processes of reflection about their context, issues and aspirations, and the contribution of the research to the realisation of these aspirations.

Definitions of Action Research

There are many definitions of Action Research. For Popplewell and Hayman: "*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.*"²

Reason and Bradbury describe Action Research as:

"A participatory, democratic practice 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

² Popplewell, R., and R. Hayman. 2012. "Briefing Paper 32: Where, how and why are Action Research approaches used by international development non-governmental organisations?" Oxford: INTRAC, 1.
www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=752

*practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.*³

Multiple Action Research approaches exist, and the family is constantly evolving as new approaches are created and existing ones refined. Commonly recognised approaches include Classical Action Research, Action Learning, Action Science, and Participatory Action Research. However, Popplewell and Hayman find that in practice, international development organisations using Action Research – such as ICCO – often pick and mix elements of a variety of approaches to create a tailor-made approach that better suits their context, resources and the issue they are researching.⁴

Why did ICCO choose to use Action Research?

ICCO uses Action Research where it intends to learn with stakeholders from ICCO's joint practice. In recent years, ICCO has undergone a series of major organisational changes, including the adoption of new strategic interventions, policies and practices. With the two Action Research projects outlined here, ICCO's intention was to develop a better understanding about the effectiveness and appropriateness of two new strategic interventions: the use of Multi-Stakeholder Processes, and the Programmatic Approach (itself a type of Multi-Stakeholder Process). The overall aim of the projects was to support partner organisations and other stakeholders to learn from and gain insights into these processes, with a view to improving them. In both cases it was felt that Action Research was the most appropriate research methodology. This is because ICCO believes it is crucial for research to contribute to change, and that the subjects of the research participate meaningfully so that the research reflects their voice and

³ Reason, P. and H. Bradbury. 2001. *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage, 1.

⁴ Popplewell and Hayman 2012, 2.

interests. More conventional forms of research are often unable to do this, whereas Action Research can help to catalyse change based on deeper levels of understanding that are reached through joint reflection by researchers and research subjects.

ICCO had a number of assumptions about the changing nature of development processes and the challenges faced by partner organisations, which underpinned its choice of the Programmatic Approach. It was hoped that Action Research would help ICCO understand whether these assumptions were valid, through exploring the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders. This was a key motivation of ICCO's policy and development team, who were responsible for instigating the two Action Research projects.

Organisational changes within ICCO

ICCO has undergone major changes in its organisational structure, and its implementation and cooperation strategies over the last five years. This process, called *Pro-Co-De* (Programmatic Approach, Co-responsibility and Decentralization), has changed the organisation and its ways of working with partner organisations completely.

The Programmatic Approach represents a new way of supporting development initiatives by local development organisations. ICCO has moved away from supporting and funding individual partners, to supporting programmes developed and implemented by groups of new and existing partner organisations (called Programmatic Coalitions) in cooperation with ICCO. This shift is intended to lead to independent collaborative programmes functioning with funding from ICCO and possibly other funders. These multi-stakeholder processes aim to be able to address fundamental underlying causes of poverty and to promote systemic change. It is: *"A process that leads to organisations working together based on a joint analysis, shared vision and objectives and clear perspective on the results of the*

cooperation. In such a process all stakeholders can do different things, work at various levels and use their own strengths for the common purpose, as well as share some activities and in particular share and participate in the linking and learning processes. The Programmatic Approach is a multi-stakeholder cooperation process aiming at systemic change.”⁵

Co-responsibility and decentralisation are delivered through the establishment of regional offices, which bring decision making and implementation of policy to the regions, and of regional councils constituted of people from the region with relevant backgrounds and vision that do not have a funding relation to ICCO.

This set up has led to major changes in the way ICCO and its member organisations relate to their partner organisations. ICCO’s relationship with its partners is now based on developing and implementing Programmatic Coalitions with joint objectives and activities.

Another reason for selecting the Action Research approach is that it fits with ICCO’s organisational values. ICCO believes that processes of knowledge generation should be highly participatory. Stakeholders should be involved at all stages of the research process, and should be treated as subjects rather than objects of research. ICCO also believes that knowledge generation should support the learning of all stakeholders, rather than just a few. Including all stakeholders throughout the research process means they are more likely to learn from the research, and ensure that the learning produced is relevant to them and their situation. Finally, ICCO believes that knowledge generation should produce action and social change – something that is at the core of Action Research.

⁵ Walters, H. 2011. “Guidance Note for the Programmatic Approach of the ICCO Alliance.” Utrecht: ICCO Alliance.

How did ICCO use Action Research?

ICCO launched two Action Research projects in September 2011. The first, called *Learning about the Programmatic Approach*, investigated the implementation of this new strategic intervention. The research was conducted by six Junior Action Researchers, each placed with a different Programmatic Coalition. The second project, called *Power in Multi-Stakeholder Processes*, was conducted in collaboration with five other Dutch development organisations – Cordaid, Waste, Fair Trade Original (FTO), Both Ends, ETC – and two support organisations – Centre for Development Innovation of Wageningen University and Research (CDI-WUR) and PSO.

Learning about the Programmatic Approach

This Action Research project was led by six Junior Action Researchers and members of ICCO’s policy and development team, who together formed the Convenor Group. The Convenor Group established five linked Action Research sub-projects within five Programmatic Coalitions – groups of new and existing ICCO partner organisations tasked with developing and implementing the Programmatic Approach. The first step was to develop a preliminary set of ideas or hypotheses about the focus of the research: the Programmatic Approach. Researchers tested the validity of these hypotheses throughout the research through supporting all stakeholders to reflect on their experiences of developing and implementing the Programmatic Approach, and to see if alternative hypothesis also emerged. While the hypotheses were developed by the Convenor Group, preliminary lines of inquiry for each sub-project were subsequently developed in cooperation with ICCO Programme Officers and where possible, other stakeholders involved in each of the Programmatic Coalitions.

The development of hypotheses is not typical in Action Research. The reason ICCO decided to take this approach was to ensure some level of coherence between the five sub-projects. The hypotheses and preliminary lines of inquiry were later translated into learning questions in collaboration with all appropriate stakeholders. To do this ICCO used a participatory process based on individual and group conversations about the purpose of the Action Research and the work of each Programmatic Coalition. A concern was that the central formulation of hypotheses and lines of inquiry by the convenors could hinder the ownership and appropriation of the research by the stakeholders. It was therefore very important that the learning questions for the Action Research were framed and formulated by the stakeholders themselves in their own language; in other words, informed by the way stakeholders understand the cooperative process that they are involved in. This meant that the learning questions that were developed were all very different: each set of questions was rooted in stakeholders' own understanding, experiences and the local context within which they worked.

Examples of learning questions developed by stakeholders in the Learning about the Programmatic Approach Action Research project

- What has been the role of partner organisations, beneficiaries, facilitators and ICCO in the process of developing a programme?
- Which are the processes, relations and activities that allow/do not allow a programme to generate change/create development value? Does the cooperation lead to a better result: are they able to realise their own objectives or the objectives of the cooperative 'structure' and what needs to be done to improve the results of the cooperation?
- Which is the most important initiative, process or activity that promotes joint learning?

- How has working in a programme approach affected or influenced the relationship between partners mutually and between partners and ICCO Cooperation?
- Are there any indications of a shift in power balance within the Programme Coalitions and what has caused this shift?

Power in Multi-Stakeholder Processes

ICCO followed a slightly different sequence of steps in this project. A Convenor Group (of four organisations: ETC, ICCO, Cordaid and CDI-WUR) first developed a research outline and terms of reference, which were based on ICCO's organisational policies and experiences as well as theoretical inputs from existing academic work on Multi-Stakeholder Processes, power and social change. At the same time each participating organisation proposed two research locations, which were known as Action Research and Learning Sites. For each site, contacts were established with the stakeholders involved in the Multi-Stakeholder Process (staff of the convenor organisation and the partner organisations involved). Later on PSO and other participating organisations (Both Ends, Fair Trade Original and WASTE) joined these discussions.

Existing research has predominantly focused on solutions to the issue of power in the design and facilitation of Multi-Stakeholder Processes. While this is important, if we assume that the designer and facilitator are often interlinked in the network of power relations, and every stakeholder holds some form and degree of power, then we should also focus on the opportunities for disadvantaged stakeholders to strengthen and exercise their power to influence the outcome of the Multi-Stakeholder Processes to their benefit. Furthermore, ICCO wanted to transcend the current either-or approach to the question of whether disadvantaged stakeholders should participate in Multi-Stakeholder Processes. ICCO believes this depends on the conditions of the

process, and the capacities of the stakeholders, facilitators, and supporting organisations. ICCO's analysis should therefore enable stakeholders to identify the conditions under which participation is an effective strategy and the capacities that this requires, as well as the available alternatives.

In this project, the sites consisted of a selection of Multi-Stakeholder Processes that the participating organisations and/or their Southern partners are involved in. During the Action Research, members of these processes were invited to reflect on their own change process and the power dynamics in it. A local researcher facilitated this process in each site.

However, as with the previous project, the Convenor Group was responsible for developing the preliminary lines of inquiry. These can be summarised as follows:

- How can local organisations, which are usually less powerful stakeholders, be empowered to operate strategically in a multi-stakeholder setting?
- How can power differences between stakeholders be taken into account in the development of multi-stakeholder cooperative processes in order to ensure effective participation of the weaker, smaller or less powerful stakeholders?
- Given the growing involvement of local organisations in Multi-Stakeholder Processes, what are the implications for relationships between local CSO and Northern agencies?
- How should Northern agencies deal with power imbalances when participating in or being related to Multi-Stakeholder Processes?

By answering these questions, this Action Research aimed to add a practical and normative dimension to existing academic work on power in Multi-Stakeholder Processes. The ambition was to provide insight into effective strategies to influence power dynamics in Multi-Stakeholder Processes, working from the normative principle that marginalised groups deserve

better access, voice and agency in these processes. It was therefore hoped that this would contribute to a much needed link between theory and practice.

Implementing the Action Research

In both projects, the implementation stage started with an initial workshop involving all researchers and convenors. After the workshops, the Action Researchers commenced the field work. In the case of the Learning about the Programmatic Approach, the Junior Action Researchers each conducted five months of field work with one of the five Programmatic Coalitions. In the Power in Multi-Stakeholder Processes project, the consultants conducting the research made several visits to the field sites to collect data.

Within each project, the Action Researchers' first step was to develop learning and research questions with the all stakeholders involved. In both processes the sequence of steps was:

- Familiarisation and getting to know the stakeholders and key thematic issues
- Individual interviews with stakeholders
- Reading background literature and documentation
- Initial meeting or workshop to identify learning and research questions with stakeholders involved. Methods used in these workshops included:
 - Joint analysis (stakeholder, power, institutional, context, timeline)
 - Participatory video
 - Reflection and dialogue sessions for sharing of first findings
 - Strategic Planning and Theory of Change development
 - Resource and decision making analysis tools
 - Power analysis tools⁶

⁶ The tools used in the ALS processes were presented in Brouwer, H., A. Groot Kormelinck and S. van Vugt. 2012. "Tools for analysing power in multi-stakeholder processes – a menu." Toolbox developed for the Thematic Learning Programme 'Strategically dealing with power dynamics in multi-stakeholder processes'. Wageningen UR/Centre for Development Innovation. The tools used in the

- Visiting sub-research sites, communities and stakeholders
- Defining and seeking feedback on research questions and research processes
- Identification of bottlenecks and constraints
- Agreement on steps to be taken for improvement of constraints.

What did ICCO learn about Action Research?

The results of the Action Research projects were generally very positive. Both projects resulted in an improved sense of clarity about the purpose of the cooperation, roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved and improved internal communication; new engagement in the cooperative process or Multi-Stakeholder Processes by stakeholders; a strengthened sense of ownership; empowerment of less powerful groups, particularly through use of participatory video, and involvement of the 'least' powerful stakeholders (women, producers, indigenous peoples, etc.); and greater coherence in the cooperative platform.

From a methodological perspective, ICCO found that the Action Research resulted in:

- Training for capacity development, in particular furthering capacities for inter-organisational cooperation or between various stakeholder groups
- Engagement of stakeholders at a local level through interviews and dialogue, as well as participation in activities
- Design and facilitation of a learning and reflection segment within key meetings
- Documentation of the learning process being used as a basis for ongoing reflection
- The introduction of innovative tools for dealing with power issues in Multi-Stakeholder Processes, purposeful cooperation, analysis of the problematic on which the Multi-

Stakeholder Processes is active, and reflection on these tools.

Issues and learning

Although both Action Research projects were very successful, ICCO encountered a number of common issues. The primary issue was the inclusion of all stakeholders, particularly local stakeholders based in developing countries, in the initial stages. This was much more difficult than anticipated, and meant that several important choices – such as the decision to use Action Research as an approach, the focus of the Action Research, the development of hypotheses and lines of inquiry, and the choice of research sites – were made largely by the Convenor Groups (sometimes, but not always, in consultation with key stakeholders) rather than in a fully participatory manner. Difficulties in communication and geographical distance between initial organisers and the research sites meant that a meaningful participatory process involving all the coalitions and organisations in each a research site was simply not possible at this stage. This led to problems in getting everyone on board, making joint decisions, and establishing joint hypotheses and lines of inquiry.

In both cases, the research was initially driven by ICCO (and in the case of the Power in Multi-Stakeholder Processes, the other Northern organisations participating in the project), and so they essentially began as top down rather than bottom up processes. While consultation with ICCO staff in the focus countries and staff of partner organisations (as representatives of the stakeholders involved) did take place in the preparatory phases, the partner organisations themselves only played a limited role at this stage. In both cases, it was only upon the arrival of the Action Researcher in the locality that contacts were established with local stakeholders, and they had an opportunity to become subjects in the Action Research and make it their own.

Programmatic Approach were presented in Walters 2011.

While the research was initially developed by the Convenors Group, ICCO was keen for it to ultimately be owned by the stakeholders and participants of the Action Research. Therefore, a degree of control needed to be handed over to the stakeholders and participants. It also necessitated a high degree of openness and flexibility, both in the design of the Action Research and the approach of Action Researchers. An important example relates to the development of the learning and research questions. In each project, these questions were developed in a participatory manner including all stakeholders within each of the research sites. To ensure that the learning questions really did reflect the concerns of participants and stakeholders, the Action Researchers also had to be open and flexible; something made possible through the Terms of Reference, which allowed space and time for Action Researchers to get to know stakeholders and fully consult them about what they wanted the Action Research to focus on. Developing the research and learning questions in a participatory manner meant the Action Research was relevant to the subjects of the research, and importantly supported the appropriation and ownership of the research by the participants.

Even at this stage ICCO continued to encounter difficulties in ensuring the participation of stakeholders at a local level. Action Researchers found it hard to get all the stakeholders together at the same time for workshops and joint meetings because of other priorities and commitments. Moreover, participants were often being asked to invest time and energy in a process that they initially did not see as something that would help them solve the problems and issues of importance to them. However, ICCO noted that once the stakeholders became more aware of the benefits they could reap from participating in the Action Research, levels of initial engagement increased. Once participants were involved their level of awareness about the project and motivation to participate increased, sustaining their involvement. ICCO also

found that the use of participatory tools in particular were key to increasing engagement, not just in the Action Research but also in the cooperative processes (the Programmatic Coalitions and Multi-Stakeholder Processes). For example, the use of participatory video in both Burkina Faso in the context of a shea butter producers value chain and in Madagascar in a food and water security programme coalition, was very effective in bringing to the fore the issues, opinions and meanings of stakeholders in Multi-Stakeholder Processes. In a participatory video the stakeholders themselves write the script, film and then analyse the information brought out in the film. This led in both cases to a strengthening of the cooperative process: hitherto tacit opinions, meanings and perceptions came out that were very important as the start of a change in direction in the cooperation.

Concluding thoughts

ICCO's experiences, supported and captured by the Action Research projects outlined above, have shown that participatory action and reflection can lead to effective changes in cooperative processes through bringing out the perceptions of all concerned, and bringing to the fore lessons of relevance for both the participants and the wider community. While ICCO had some difficulties ensuring participation of all stakeholders in the early stages of the Action Research, with time and the use of participatory tools and processes, meaningful participation and ownership were achieved. Eventually, most participants were engaging at a level that really allowed them to become subjects of the research – to own the research and ensure that it focused on issues that mattered to them. Despite some teething troubles, project facilitators and participants got there in the end and the aims of doing Action Research were realised.