From Action Research to Advocacy

Promoting Women's Political Participation in North Africa

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Introduction

From the first stirrings of the 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia in December 2010, a striking feature was how women stood shoulder to shoulder with men to demand change. These were indeed heady times. As authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region fell before an irresistible wave of people power, a brave new world seemed to be opening up - one brimming with possibility. Observing the explosion of civil society in Libya, a commentator was moved to quote Wordsworth: "*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven*".

Sadly those early hopes and high expectations have proved to be over-optimistic - in the short term at least. The unity which swept governments from power did not extend to a shared vision for the future. Factions based on ethnicity or religious conviction soon emerged and competed for power, sometimes violently.

Those who support political Islam have very different aspirations from those with a more liberal, secular outlook. Perhaps inevitably, the task of building a new society has proved to be messier and more complicated than was envisaged amidst the early euphoria.

But this harsh reality does not negate entrench democracy and promote human rights through a strong civil society. In a contested and sometimes chaotic context, effective interventions to bring about social change are now more important than ever.

A distinctive approach to women's political empowerment

It was with this in mind that the British Council initiated the Women Participating in Public Life (WPIPL) Project.[1] INTRAC played a supporting role throughout and this Praxis Note represents the personal reflections and key lessons learned from the vantage point of a facilitator in the project.

The WPIPL project had as an overall objective the promotion of "*the active engagement of women in local and national political processes*". What was distinctive about the approach was starting with an initial action research cycle before embarking on the advocacy cycle to achieve greater women's political participation.

Main steps in process for Action Research to Advocacy Projects:

1. Participating women selected in each country according to their interest and against agreed criteria.
2. Training carried out in Action Research.
3. Action Research issue selected based on the group's analysis of women's political participation in that country.
4. Action Research Plan developed in detail.
5. Action Research carried out and written up as a report.
6. Training carried out in Advocacy.
7. Advocacy issue selected based on key findings from Action Research report.
8. Advocacy Strategy on chosen issue developed in detail.
9. Advocacy Strategy implemented.

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[1] The WPIPL Project was funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO's) Arab Partnership Initiative through the Department for International Development (DfID).

The term action research is used in many ways, but can be broadly understood as a group of research approaches that are highly participatory, making the process of generating knowledge more democratic (Alkhas, T, Alunni, A, Hammad, S and Popplewell R, 2015). Action research differs from 'conventional' research in a number of respects (Hall, 1981):
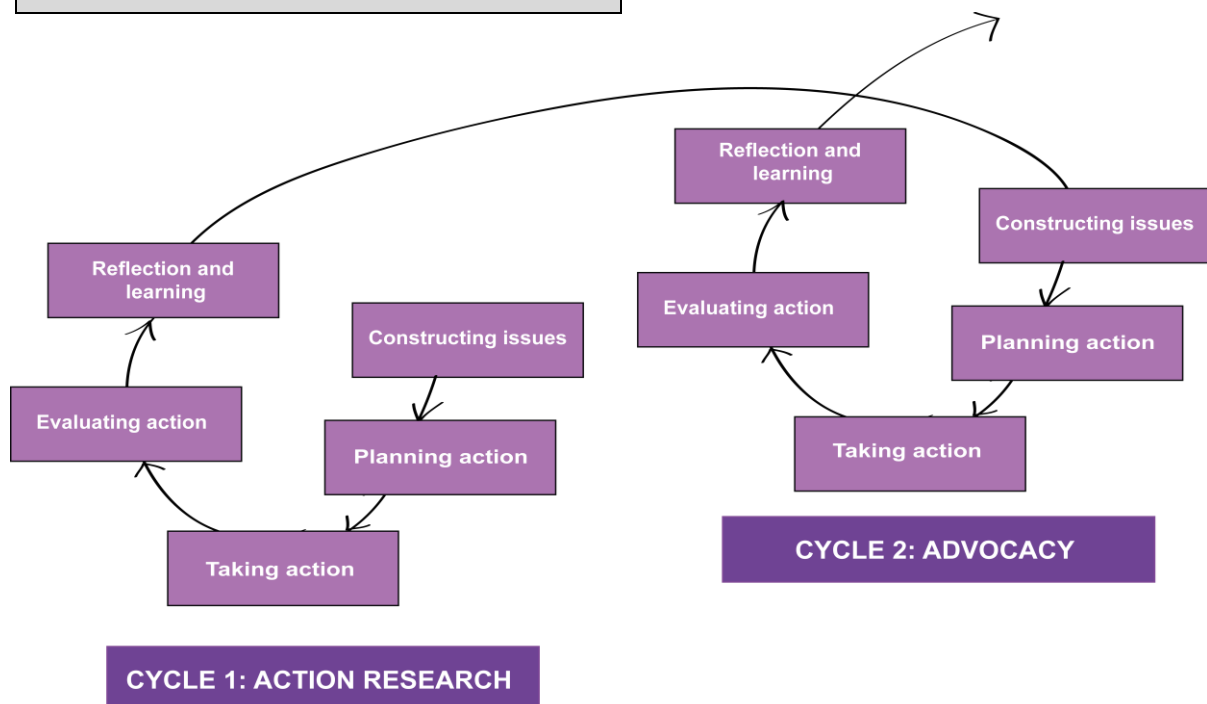
Five Key Principles of Action Research:

1. Practitioner focused: led or conducted in close collaboration with practitioners.
2. Participatory: research participants and stakeholders involved throughout the process.
3. Value driven: reflecting and informed by the values of the action researchers.
4. Action oriented: supporting and leading to action and change.
5. Reflective: action researchers should continually question the research process and themselves.

The second cycle would take the action research findings and, using the same team throughout, develop an appropriate advocacy strategy. This would adopt advocacy methods and messages according to the issue, incorporating the research findings.

The intended benefits of this approach were:

- Advocacy work would be strengthened by activists having directly 'lived' the research themselves, as opposed to commissioning others or not doing it at all.
- Participants would grow and develop in the process - both as individuals and as a team - in a context where capacity is lacking and civil society collaboration can be problematic.
- Advocacy would be rooted in evidence, rather than simply asserting a particular position based on prejudice.

CYCLE 1: ACTION RESEARCH

CYCLE 2: ADVOCACY

What Happened

The first step was to identify coalitions of organisations and individuals committed to promoting women's political empowerment in each of four countries: Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. In Tunisia, there was an existing coalition, while in the other three countries they were built from scratch by the British Council according to agreed criteria for participants. Some participants had previous research experience, but most did not.

After analysing the context in their country with respect to women's political participation, each group chose an issue they felt to be particularly relevant in their context. For example, Tunisia chose to address the question: "*How to increase women's participation in political processes at the local and national levels by strengthening their self-confidence and awareness of their rights?*"

From the outset, the mantra was that this was not 'research for the sake of research', but would lead into action to improve the situation.

Each group then designed a detailed research plan to answer their chosen question. They developed sub-questions and then selected a mix of methodologies, most commonly including a literature review, questionnaires, focus groups and case studies.

Once the data collection was completed, it was analysed and key findings were developed and recommendations were made. From this, and also reflecting on the current political context in each country, an advocacy issue was identified for each group and an advocacy strategy was developed based on a theory of change. Advocacy then commenced based on these strategies with a combination of activities such as lobbying, media work and community mobilisation and capacity building.

There was also a regional dimension to the overall process, seeking to link and stimulate collaboration between each of the four countries. This was underpinned by two regional workshops which brought all the groups together to share experiences.

Challenges and Delays

This all took much longer than originally anticipated (which projects do not?). The rule of thumb seems to be: plan all the work against what seems a reasonable timetable … and then expect it to take twice as long.

In this case, there was a 'triple hurdle' to clear. Firstly, if any research process is properly designed, implemented and written up to a reasonable standard, it does require a substantial effort and there are few short-cuts. Secondly, the work was being done by groups (typically 6-8 members) from different organisations, presenting challenges both in terms of physically arranging meetings and negotiating decisions. Thirdly, for three of these countries (Libya, Morocco and Tunisia), the participants were volunteers rather than staff, so they were trying to fit the work in during evenings and weekends around other jobs and social commitments.

In theory, the second and third of these hurdles could have been avoided with

different choices. However, working with a single organisation rather than a coalition of organisations would have reduced the collective voice and range of skills that makes advocacy work more likely to succeed. Volunteers certainly have less time available, but the fact they are prepared to give up their time without material benefit, underlines their commitment and possibly enhances the prospects for sustainability.

In addition, local events significantly affected the contexts in which the processes were occurring. In Egypt, shortly after the first workshop, President Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted and the Constitution was suspended. A new Constitution was subsequently discussed and approved and President el-Sisi consolidated his position through the May 2014 election. New parliamentary elections were due to be held in the first half 2015, but were then postponed. It seemed that with every visit, the goalposts had moved with major implications for the project. But one advantage of the approach adopted was that it was seen as valid to adjust the approach to the circumstances, rather than rigidly sticking to the original plan.

Libya faced even more daunting challenges. Starting from a position of considerable optimism in 2013, the security situation progressively deteriorated until in July-August 2014, control of Tripoli changed hands. There are now two rival governments and the situation in much of the country remains confused and prone to outbreaks of local conflict. For a period the Tripoli team were dispersed and could not meet, let alone advance their work. But they did manage to convene in Amman in February 2015 to analyse their

research findings and develop an outline advocacy strategy.

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Ten Things Learned in the Process

This was a complex multi-country process lasting nearly two years so far, whose effects it is hoped will extend far beyond that. In addition to the Action Research reports and strategies, it generated a mass of experience and learning. From the point of view of a facilitator, the most important points for anyone contemplating a similar process are as follows.

1. Selection of participants

What worked (and what didn't work) has depended on the participants. To a large extent the destiny of the programme in each country was prescribed from the early moments when the criteria were defined (by INTRAC) and the participants were selected (by the local British Council Project Manager in each country). The most valuable individual attributes, often more significant than expertise in research and advocacy, turned out to be those most difficult to assess and measure. Firstly, commitment was essential as this was a long term process with little remuneration and a lot of work. In practice, while promises

were easily made during planning meetings, much of the work was done by a very small number of people in each group and their contributions were essential. Willingness to learn was also vital: sometimes it was easier to work with less qualified, experienced participants, as they proved more open to new ways of working. The ability to work together was also an essential individual and joint trait. The passion of women's rights activists was essential, but sometimes also made it difficult to come to agreement and move forwards.

The British Council Project Managers' local knowledge and understanding of individuals' real attitudes and relationships between participants was invaluable.

2. Deciding on the research question

The process in each country might well have been easier if the research questions had been more tightly focused on a very specific issue in the realm of women's political participation. For example, if a question such as "*How can women's profile as political leaders be strengthened in the media?*" had been identified, this would immediately have limited the field of inquiry. But the consequence of working with a coalition of disparate organisations meant that the research question often ended up encapsulating the interests of each and remained quite broad. For example, one organisation was focused on economic empowerment, so this had to be included in the research question even it was not the priority of the rest of the group in that country. At the same time, the joint ownership of the process was important. Probably the only alternative to what transpired, would have been to define a more specific question at an

earlier stage and then recruit organisations around that. But this would have required driving the process more from the top, which would have had its own disadvantages.

3. Carrying out the research

Once the overall research question was chosen, a great deal of necessary time was spent on defining and refining the related sub-questions and sub-sub-questions. These did not just establish the areas of investigation, but also provided the structure for the subsequent analysis of data and the research report itself. Deciding on the methodologies was not so problematic, but it did take some hard graft to develop the tools (e.g. the questionnaires) and agree the sampling size and method. Often there was a desire to move rapidly into the actual data collection - perhaps not surprising when bearing in mind that many participants were activists. It was a matter of judgement as to when the detailed research plan was 'good enough' to proceed. But on the balance, while frustrating at times, it made sense to take as long as necessary to come up with a strong plan, after which the actual data collection could happen relatively quickly and smoothly.

A wide range of options for research methodologies were presented to participants and initially there were ambitious plans to use many of these. But in due course, as the difficulty of finding the necessary time to carry out the research sunk in, a remarkably similar menu emerged in each country: a literature review, questionnaires (with mostly closed questions), focus group discussions and sometimes case studies. While people initially liked the idea of more participatory methods (e.g.

timelines or social mapping), when it came down to it, they were not seen as 'proper' research and hence were given less weight. Furthermore, of the methods used, the questionnaires which generated quantitative data were often viewed as more significant than qualitative insights. Some participants were from a scientific background (e.g. medical doctors) where Randomised Control Trials are seen as the 'gold standard', so naturally they tended to this view. Similarly, this perspective took a position on research where a hypothesis is proposed to be proved or disproved. But in examining the causes of women's exclusion from politics, there are generally a range of interrelated factors, so more open-ended exploration is appropriate. For example, the question is not so much whether women's economic independence leads to political participation (or not), as what is the relative importance and influence of economic independence as it interacts with other factors.

In fact, while the quantitative data provided useful figures (e.g. the percentage of men from different cohorts supporting women's political participation), the qualitative information produced more interesting explanatory information on why people felt as they did and hence how advocacy messages could be framed.

4. Analysing the research data

In practical terms, it proved challenging and time consuming to analyse the quantitative data, which usually relied on one of two people. Once all the data was in a usable form, participants overlaid results from different sources against the different research questions. Did the questionnaires confirm or

contradict what was found in the literature review?

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The overriding issue was how to identify and interpret the most significant findings from the morass of information that had been collected. A useful question here was: what do you find most surprising about what you have learned?

Participants tended to feel that they knew all the pertinent facts about the situation already, but this was not necessarily the case. For example, one interesting finding in some areas was that young people could be more conservative in their views towards women's political engagement than older people - contrary to what you might expect.

5. Linking the advocacy to the research

The whole point to this approach was to derive the advocacy issues and strategy from the research findings, but in practice this linkage was not always easy to make.

This was exacerbated by the fact that, (probably mistakenly in retrospect), some new participants joined the process at a later stage, bringing in particular advocacy skills to the teams. While in principle these new participants

accepted that the advocacy strategies would be based on the research findings, in reality they often wanted to push their own favourite preoccupation, regardless of what the research was saying.

Another problem was that the research findings themselves did not necessarily point in a single direction, leaving the field open for participants to ignore them altogether and promote their own pre-conceived agenda. Interestingly, the linkage worked better with Libya, partly because they were so delayed (due to local upheavals) that the analysis of the research findings had to be done immediately prior to developing the outline advocacy strategy. This meant that the research findings were much more in mind than when there was more of a gap between the two phases.

The area where the research has proved particularly helpful is in providing evidence to buttress advocacy positions and to be able to counter opponents with solid arguments. For example, the fact that a large majority of all demographic groups in all the countries support women's political participation in principle undermines those who would claim that this runs counter the traditions and feelings of the region.

6. Developing the advocacy strategy

In addition to linking back to the research findings, defining the advocacy strategy also required taking account of current and upcoming political developments in that context. Since the priority issue as defined by many of the coalitions was to enable more, qualified women to attain positions of political power, then the agenda was set in part by what elections were coming up in the

immediate future: in Egypt it was for the National Assembly; in Morocco it was for local communes, regions, professional chambers and trade unions.

Matrix ranking to compare alternative suggestions proved a useful way to make group decisions. As is frequently the case in designing advocacy strategies, there was an inclination for participants to jump straight to activities, rather than thinking more strategically. Therefore the facilitated process included constructing a Theory of Change using evidence gleaned from the research and other sources.

The resulting strategies typically contained a combination of higher level advocacy with grassroots awareness raising and mobilisation. While there was a limited timeframe for the project, there is a recognition that the fundamental underlying issues are entrenched attitudes, which can only be changed over a generation or more.

7. It's all about the coalitions

If it was necessary to choose the single most significant success factor, it would have to be how the coalitions worked. While the action research, advocacy and associated technical issues all had their complexities, it was the coalitions that ultimately determined whether the process sank or swam. The fact that the groups were comprised of passionate women's rights activists was a strength in terms of generating energy, but was sometimes challenging in terms of cooperation. In such circumstances, a difference of opinion on quite a small technical issue such as how to sample, could rapidly escalate to much larger questions of ideology, identity and status within the group. At one point, it

was observed with reference to Tuckman's model of 'norming, storming, forming and performing', that we seemed to be spending an awful lot of time in the storming phase. Certainly at various points there were heated arguments, threats to quit, stormings-out, tears and curtailed meetings.

The nature of problems varied from one country (and group of individuals) and there is no single way to solve these. However, in retrospect, there could usefully have been more work specifically on how coalitions work, what type of problems can arise and how they can be overcome.

Nevertheless, when asked to identify the best aspects of the process, many participants referred to their working together, overcoming difficulties and sharing the satisfaction of joint achievement.

8. The regional dimension

Part of the thinking behind the programme was that it should develop a regional dimension, but ultimately this did not really take off. While the inter-regional workshops enabled participants to meet, share experiences and in some cases to continue with bi-lateral contacts, it did not go much beyond that. It remained a regional programme more in the sense that it contained similar projects in one region, rather than taking on an overarching regional aspect. Why was this?

While the countries featured similarities in terms of culture, religion and a history of authoritarian rule, they were also marked differences. Working in a single fashion across all those contexts would not have made sense, as that would

have failed to take account of local conditions.

In terms of advocacy targets, there is no regional government or institution to influence that can make much difference. Rather these questions are determined by national (and lower) forms of government, so this was where research and advocacy efforts needed to be focused.

An online platform was established to share experiences, documents and ideas, but as INTRAC has found in other initiatives, these are hard to bring to life and keep active. Participants would have preferred more opportunities for face-to-face interaction, but given the costs of international travel, the opportunities for this were limited. Ultimately the mechanism for transferring learning was more through having shared facilitators working across all the countries.

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9. Looking forwards and backwards simultaneously

The double cycle diagram (action research leading into advocacy) was useful in explaining the process in a logical fashion. It also matched the chronological order of activities to be undertaken in a clear step-by-step way. But it was also somewhat simplistic. While the arrows on the cycles may all point in one direction, it is not quite such

a linear progression in practice. When defining the research question, it is necessary to look far ahead and anticipate what the advocacy strategy might be (but without pre-determining it altogether), otherwise there is the danger of researching something which has no practical usage. Conversely, having decided upon an advocacy strategy, it may become clear that there are gaps in the research that need to be revisited to strengthen the case.

This underlines the importance of maintaining flexibility throughout: the reflective emphasis within action research may necessitate adjustments along the way. Promoting women's political participation is a long term struggle, so it is apt here to quote a war-time general when he said: "*I have always found that plans are useless, while planning is indispensable*" (Eisenhower). The situation in Libya was an example where that the need to respond to drastically changing circumstances was paramount. Research that was initially planned with a very different scenario in mind was ultimately used to provide the basis for preparing women for national and local dialogues between different parties as the country was plunged into conflict.

10. The facilitator's dilemma

The perpetual question a facilitator must ask themselves is how much to push and how much to let a group run by itself. The dangers of going too far in one direction or the other are clear. If the facilitator sets the agenda and takes control too much, then this undermines the group's sense of ownership, responsibility and ultimately the prospects for sustainability. On the other hand, if the facilitator is completely 'hands-off', then problematic directions

can be taken, quality standards may fall and momentum is lost. The glib answer to the dilemma is to strike a balance. But where this balance point lies is a question of judgement according to the circumstances, issues and individuals involved.

Additional elements in the equation were the British Council Project Managers in each country, who were also doing follow-up, mostly in an administrative sense (e.g. pushing to get the research completed). With the benefit of hindsight, they could have been more involved in the content side of the work, but taking care to ensure that they and the facilitator were giving the same messages.

The urge for the facilitator to intervene was increased by the pressure to complete the project within the specified two year time frame. After the initial workshops, the facilitator did several rounds of all the countries having a one day meeting with each group. Just prior to these meetings, there tended to be a flurry of activity so as to have more to show and discuss, so their benefit was in galvanising participants as much as the discussions themselves.

Sometimes group members confidentially asked the facilitator to make a particular point to the rest of the group, because they were struggling with other members, and it was felt that resolution would be easier coming from the external, impartial 'expert'. But undoubtedly the greatest successes from the process came when a group encountered a problem, discussed it through and resolved it themselves - and then could report it proudly back to the facilitator.

Heba Adel Sayed: From Personal Empowerment to Policy Influencing

Heba Adel Sayed has been a lawyer for fourteen years and has always been concerned for women's rights. She was one of the members of the Egypt core team, which decided in June 2013 that their action research question was going to be: "*How do we influence and use legislation to empower women to enter national parliament?*". On 30th June 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood Government was overthrown and the political playing field changed dramatically. The Shura Council was suspended and a 'Group of 50' people was appointed to draft a new constitution for the country.

The Egypt team knew that the issue of a quota system for women's participation was under discussion. They saw an opportunity and decided to accelerate their approach in the light of this new situation. They undertook a quick research exercise using only secondary sources on the role of Egyptian women in politics through history, on positive discrimination and on quota systems.

Heba was one of the spokespersons to talk on behalf of the women's movement in front of the committee that was drafting the electoral law. Heba says that she would not have put herself forward and would not have been such a good negotiator had it not been for her involvement in the action research process. This increased her knowledge on specific, relevant issues such as quotas, but also in other disciplines like sociology. She gained confidence that made her believe she could be the best informed person to act on behalf of the women´s movement: "*When I was in front of the Committee, I spoke passionately maybe using emotional arguments, but I knew I also had the answers to all their specific questions. This knowledge came from the action research group*".

After the advocacy campaign from the women´s movement, the new Constitution passed in January 2014, Article 11 commits the state to "*Taking the necessary measures to ensure appropriate representation of women*" in legislative bodies and other high public posts. In the Electoral law of June 2014, a quota was established that guarantees at least 70 out of 567 seats (approximately 12%) to women in the next legislature. This compared favourably with the previous parliament, where women held only 1.6% of seats.

It is too much to claim and there is no solid evidence to suggest that Heba Adel's (and the broader group's) intervention was the cause for these changes. There were many others making similar representations. However during the project evaluation a number of leading figures in the women's movement, including one woman who had been part of the 'Group of 50', identified Heba Adel as a key figure who helped achieve the policy gains.

Conclusion

So what did all this add up to? On being asked about the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai is supposed to have replied: "*it is too early to say*". At the conclusion of the initial project period, the advocacy strategies were just commencing. So it was certainly premature to look for outcomes in terms of policy change, more women being mobilised and elected, let alone changes in attitudes.

However, there were some indications in terms of individual changes, as observed in the project evaluation for the British Council (Aon, M, Blight N, Otero, E and Packington E, 2015). At one level, participants acquired and enhanced skills in carrying out research and advocacy. The programme stimulated more critical reflection. As one participant put it: "*Now I think differently and I look for everything and everything raises a question in my head*". Beyond this, an independent observer noticed the obvious transformation in the confidence of the Libyan women involved, at a very different level from other women involved in the civil society in Libya.

The approach also affected how women worked together: "*[Action research] had a big positive impact on me on how I work and think within a group*", said one Moroccan activist. The following case study adapted from the project evaluation (Aon, M, Blight N, Otero, E and Packington E, 2015) shows how this could all come together.

Four years since the stirring events of Tahrir Square captured the world's imagination, prospects for women's political empowerment in the region are uncertain. In some countries, it has become as much about holding onto limited advances in women's political participation made previously as making further headway. Rather than expecting an instant transformation, many activists are now working with a longer timeframe in mind, possibly taking decades. While no panacea, this method of moving from action research to advocacy has proved a useful way to approach this task, which could well have applications in other areas too.

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