

What role for academics in participatory action research?

A contribution from INTRAC to the ESRC Seminar Series: Evidence and the Politics of Participation in Academic-INGO Research Partnerships, February 2015

Background and Examples

INTRAC has been running analytical skills training programmes in various guises for civil society practitioners in [Central Asia for almost 20 years](#). The objective: to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to research issues affecting them, take action on the basis of the evidence, and build relationships with power-holders around the research process. Through this, conditions may be created for closer engagement between civil society and policy-makers on social justice and poverty-related issues. The programme involves a modular training course in applied research skills, and mentored research projects involving or aimed at engaging with local power holders.

We have built on this programme to develop action research projects across the [Middle East and North Africa](#) with women's groups, aimed at building their capacity to carry out participatory research and develop evidence-informed programming and advocacy campaigns aimed at enhancing women's role in public life.

The Partnerships

The partnership in these programmes involves: funder(s) who finance the work; participants who directly take part in the research programmes from civil society or local government; informants, i.e. the local people who participants interview/engage with as part of the research process; local stakeholders, who may be involved in advisory roles, provide critical feedback, or offer avenues for dissemination; government or political actors who may be the target of action or a key partner in action; and capacity building providers, i.e. trainers and consultants provided by INTRAC.

The Research and Evidence Produced

The research and evidence that emerges from these programmes can be flawed in a research sense – quality may not satisfy academic standards of rigour and risks of bias are high – but the topics that groups choose to study are directly relevant to local needs, reach informants and target audiences that other researchers may not have access to, and capture and work with local knowledge that other research may not reflect. It is research and evidence that is grounded in a specific set of values and objectives. In the latest round of projects in Central Asia, one of the principal gains has been the building of relationships between civil society actors and local government officials, sparking beginnings of greater mutual trust. In Egypt the programme gave women activists the confidence to challenge the political process.

Where are the Academics?

What is the value of this story for a seminar series about academic-NGO collaboration? The academic contribution to this endeavour is minimal, except where an academic is also a civil society activist and is involved in that capacity. We have academics involved as participants and advisors in the Middle East/North Africa and Central Asia. They are learning new techniques and approaches, e.g. scientists who have never conducted participatory qualitative research, or are contributing key skills that will enhance the research (e.g. in statistical analysis). But these are not considered to be academic projects, contributing to theoretical knowledge or academic wisdom. There is little sign that the academics involved are seeking to gain academic benefit from the research through publication or new teaching content. They are involved in order to take action wearing civil society hats.

What could academic-NGO research relationships bring to this work?

In a recent discussion group in Kyrgyzstan on this programme, local actors noted an absence of spaces for collaboration between academics and NGOs in the region. The same [obstacles to collaboration that we see in the UK and beyond were present](#): lack of funding; different world views; unclear motivations for collaboration; incompatible timeframes and bureaucracies; lack of mutual respect for the research produced, etc. As a consequence there is a risk that findings are not shared with local academics, thus limiting the potential for further research and knowledge production in policy- and practice-relevant issues.

Yet there could be a lot of mutual benefit: academics could support practitioners with higher-level research skills training or support; they could help with disseminating research, or taking forward emerging research questions; they could expand the research to other areas of the country/region; or they could provide repositories for practitioner research for others to access and use.

This looks beyond partnerships for specific research projects but to skills-and knowledge-sharing across actors involved in international development.

Our challenge to participants in this seminar series revolves around the following questions:

- Do academics have anything to contribute to such action-oriented analytical skills training programmes? If so, what and how could we encourage it?
- Would collaboration enhance or damage the capacity building and relationship-building objectives that are central to these programmes?
- What types of evidence and knowledge are produced through such practitioner-generated research programmes and how are they valued (if at all) by academics in different contexts?
- What could academics do to encourage and support practitioners to share their research questions and findings so that it contributes to a pool of global knowledge that can be used and analysed further?

For more information (or responses to the above questions), please contact: Rachel Hayman, Head of Research INTRAC, rhayman@intrac.org