

Using Participatory Action Research in a Local Government Setting

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Introduction

In this paper I will prepare a set of guidelines for the use of Action Research in New Zealand local authority community development and parks and recreation settings.

Local Government Context

The New Zealand Local Government Act 1977, and its subsequent amendments in 1989 (section 37K) directs local authorities to promote effective public participation in the process of local government, allowing communities to choose between different kinds of local public facilities and services while also preserving public wellbeing.

New Zealand local authorities interpret their responsibilities under the Local Government Act by their strategic plans and policies. The Dunedin City Council for example states its purpose as the enhancement and maintenance of the "...long term wellbeing of our people..." (Dunedin City Council 1999:8). This is extrapolated in the Dunedin City Councils goals (ibid) as a recognition of "...community aspirations for involvement in local government.." to create "...a broad range recreational, cultural and social opportunities..." The Dunedin City Council further defines this obligation in its Community Policy (1997: 5 - 6) which states in its goals a desire to promote community development and foster partnerships with communities.

The Dunedin City Council's Community Policy has been recently implemented in a range of projects from neighbourhood development projects to public consultation. Common to all these projects is an involvement of local people in the determination of community needs and design of strategies to meet these needs. All projects have a problem solving/reflective element and all resulted in action.

Literature Review

Participatory Action Research

Action research is "a family of research methodologies" (Dick: 1997) which give equal weight to both research and action. Participatory Action Research is one of these methodologies. PAR has a set of values which determine that the research process must be democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing (Stringer 1996:10). PAR methodology involves a cyclic, rather than linear process, which generally begins with building a basis for participation by developing relationships between stakeholders and negotiating roles and responsibilities (Dick 1997). The role of the researcher in action research is that of facilitator who works collaboratively to involve the stakeholders in every aspect of the research process (Glesne and Peshkin 1992:11). Developing relationships is a key aspect of the research process requiring negotiation and reciprocity. The relationship between the researcher and other participants should be one of co-researchers thereby allowing input not only into results but also into definition of the problem or issue to be researched (ibid). The researcher therefore translates social experiences rather than producing a "research report" (ibid).

Use of Participatory Action Research in Local Government

PAR is a form of research which "seeks to improve the quality of people's organisational, community and family lives..." (Calhoun 1993:62) by using "a collaborative approach to *inquiry* or *investigation* that provides people with the means to take systematic *action* to resolve specific problems" (Stringer 1996:15). PAR allows communities to research their own problems, analyse them and come up with solutions (ibid). The notion of local authority collaboration with local communities to resolve specific problems sits easily alongside the NZ Local Government Act, Dunedin City Council's strategic goals and Community Policy as outlined previously. PAR therefore offers a vehicle for local authorities to ensure that communities have a genuine influence on decision making in a way that is constructive and in line with the local authorities goals, objectives and budgets.

One of the challenges for local authorities using PAR is that subjects are required to be equal partners alongside experts and professionals in order to provide a collaborative approach to problem solving (Stringer 1996:62). This process then provides an opportunity for people to extend their understanding of a situation thereby providing a model for "local, action orientated approaches to inquiry..."(ibid).

Action Research methodologies are processes which are suited to situations where there is a need for high quality data and accurate interpretations along with flexibility and participation (Dick 1997). Local Authorities have control over facilities and services which often require a high level of technical expertise, when this is coupled with the need to involve the community in decision making, it appears that PAR provides an ideal research model to use.

Issues for Local Government

A number of action researchers (Winter 1987:54, Hart and Bond 1995:147-162) have highlighted the potential for authority structures to control the balance of power in the research process. Local authorities tend to employ hierarchical management structures and as such need to develop acceptance of the participatory nature and empowerment outcomes of the PAR process amongst all stakeholders involved. Appropriate communication styles and a willingness to share power is vital in the PAR process. Individuals need to have an equal access to information including a common understanding of technical jargon. Researchers must also guard against the acting out of power struggles, which withhold information or block the release of resources (Stringer 1997:30).

The institutional structure of local authorities, which is bound by tight cycles of planning, consultation and contracting, could also threaten the effective implementation of PAR projects. Stringer (1996:19-20) warns against the intent of public agencies "to get the job done" suggesting that a lack of community control over decision making contributes to individuals feelings of frustration and powerlessness over their lives which ultimately lead to cycles of dependency and apathy. Stringer (ibid) believes that there is a general lack of understanding by professional practitioners of the many "subtle social influences" that exist in communities. This lack of

understanding may lead to the implementation of policies that relate to institutional practices and procedures rather than the needs or desires of communities (Stringer 1996:21). For example, a local authority wishing to use PAR to research the needs for playground development in a community must be flexible enough in their process to allow residents to redirect the identification of the problem to other issues related to open space and or recreation provision in their community if that is deemed to be a priority. The local authority's capital works programme must therefore allow for the PAR process to create a suitable environment for building community partnerships, otherwise the researcher may experience aggression or apathy from community members, as described by Stringer (1996:25), therefore sabotaging the chances for a positive outcome. Previously perceived difficulties such as creating unrealistic expectations and lack of technical knowledge should not emerge as problems with the PAR approach. Valuing participants informed contributions are essential for promoting an effective practitioner-researcher collaboration (Gibbs 1998:208-209).

Citizenship implies that not only do residents have rights, they also have corresponding responsibilities (Winter 1997). Similarly the community must also be open to taking responsibility for actioning problem solving and may also need to consider such things as financial restraints and city wide priorities of the local authority. Consequently the role of the researcher as facilitator is paramount in order that all parties have the information they need to work together as partners rather than as "experts" and "subjects". The relationship between the residents and the local authority should be such that the community accepts constraints more readily than if a less participatory form of consultation had been undertaken. Hart and Bond (1995:52) suggest that action researchers are better described as interface managers who develop working relationships across organisation and social boundaries in order that all stakeholders can participate at the same level. Certainly within a local authority context the researcher may need to develop working relationships that include such diverse interests as central government, local residents and local iwi (the local tribal grouping of Maori).

While the need to involve communities in decision making is enshrined in the New Zealand Local Government Act 1977 it may be argued that consultation not always well implemented. This I would suggest is not due to lack of good intent but as Stringer (1996:19-20) suggests is due to the lack of understanding of the complex social nuances by those undertaking consultation processes. If Local Authorities can create an environment that engages and mobilises people's energy then they will be able to generate activity to resolve issues (Stringer 1996: 25).

Stringer (1997:35 & 36) explains how decision making in modern life is generally undertaken by small groups of leaders (including local authorities) in the form of management committees or boards. This often leads to the decision making process taking place in a forum often out of reach of those affected. The pressure to 'get something done' can come from all sides and it is not only the sponsoring authority that needs to buy into the process but also the specific interest groups themselves. Most people are not taught the art of consensus decision making so it is not unreasonable to expect to have to undertake some education with all stakeholders as part of the negotiating entry process in order to give them the skills to work with each other in a Co-operative manner.

Implementing the PAR Process

A useful starting point for local authorities may be to develop a critical reference group or steering committee representing all stakeholders to determine the early diagnostic work. As issues develop working parties from those directly involved in an issue can be set up to do the hands on work (Dick 1997, Wadsworth 1998). It is necessary however to be aware that PAR is not something that is done on people therefore it needs to be clarified that the steering committee is not a decision making body but a channel for information between stakeholders (Dick 1997, Hart and Bond 1995:47-48).

The research group co-ordinating the process develops an analysis of the situation to be researched, identifying problems and setting goals (ibid). The group then "reflects", by critical examination, on the information gained from the analysis of the situation. From this, action planning, monitoring and evaluation systems are developed (Seymour-Rolls and Hughes 1997, Dick 1997).

Data analysis can be summarised as "organising what you have seen, heard and read so that you can make sense of what you've learned" (Glesne and Peshkin 1992:127-131). Small group discussion, written surveys, interviews, delphic, snyder and search meetings are all legitimate methods of data collection suitable for use in action research. Results can be presented as memo writing to develop thoughts; monthly field reports to track progress and record problems and developing coded analytic files to organise interviews, personal reflections, contacts and other information (Glesne and Peshkin 1992:127-131 and Dick 1997).

Data display for qualitative research is inherently more difficult than for quantitative material. Glesne and Peshkin (1992:137) suggest the use of cognitive domains displayed in the form of matrices, graphs, tables and flowcharts. Local authorities using PAR will therefore need to identify data collection and display methods, which are clear and understandable to all stakeholders. This may require education on technical issues to ensure a common basis for understanding.

Care must be taken however that data collection and display methods allow for the cyclic nature of PAR. Hart and Bond (1995:72 & 73) warn that there may be a blurring of boundaries between collecting more data and acting on findings. Analysis, they maintain should therefore take the form of discussion, which defines common understandings of the stakeholders. The elements of participation, action and research, while conceptually separate, in practice dissolve into countless cycles of participatory reflection, on action, learning about action progressing to new informed action which then is reflected on (Wadsworth 1998, Dick 1997, Stringer 1996:157). Action therefore occurs throughout the PAR process. While local authorities may focus on action related to specific projects or services, research itself, by the act of asking questions, causes intervention in social situations and inevitable change (Wadsworth 1998). Local authorities need to be aware of the potential affects of any process they initiate and ensure that it is empowering for all those participating.

Guidelines for Using Participatory Action Research in Local Government

The following guidelines provides an outline of steps a local authority may use to develop a community based action research project:

A. Developing a basis for participation

1. Set up a working group, ensuring there are a range of stakeholder representatives, to act as information brokers
2. Appoint a suitably qualified research co-ordinator
3. Identify potential stakeholders, including communities of interest and other agencies
4. Identify roles and responsibilities and devise structures for stakeholder involvement
5. Develop a project brief, including timeframes, staff and resources available

B. Data collection and analysis

1. Collect background information, using opportunities to involve stakeholders in the collection
2. Determine new information needed and collect, using opportunities to involve stakeholders in the collection
3. Stakeholders analyse information, determining common understandings

C. Action and evaluation

1. Stakeholders plan and implement action based on the analysis
2. Stakeholders monitor and evaluate action
3. If necessary modify action, based on evaluation
4. Re-enter data collection/analysis phase if necessary

Conclusion

PAR appears to be quite combatable with the local authority goals and objectives to work alongside communities to plan community and recreation provision. Issues that local authorities need to consider before undertaking a PAR project include; flexibility to work within the cyclic process, the appointment of an experienced researcher/facilitator to co-ordinate the project, a willingness to work with communities as co-researchers and a commitment to eliminate power imbalances from the process. If local authorities can satisfy these requirements then PAR should provide a valuable tool to encourage civic involvement, which is productive and empowering.

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