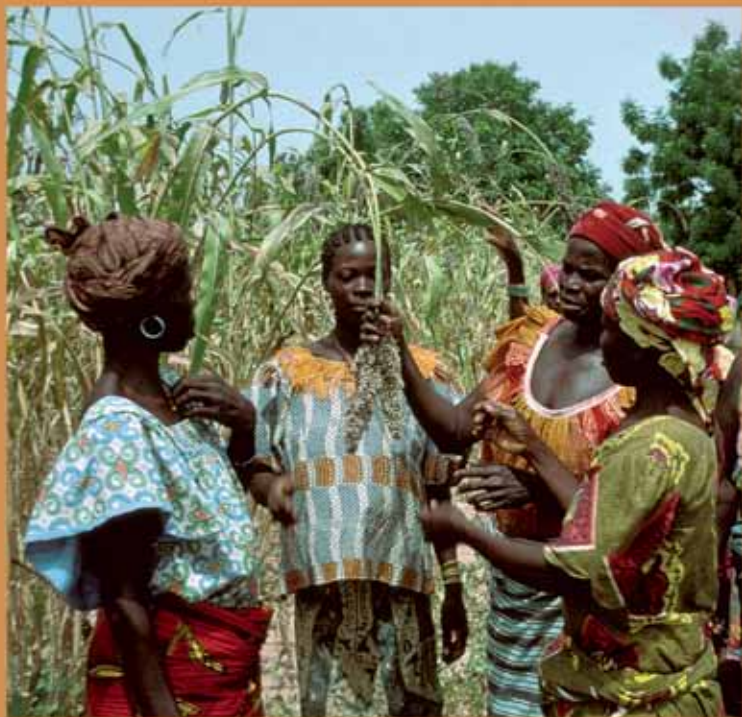




Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

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4. Important moments in an action-research partnership

G. Faure

How does an action research in partnership (ARP) begin? How do the stakeholders initiate and evaluate activities? When does the action research conclude? This chapter provides some essential answers to these questions.

Temporal aspects

▮ Phases, cycles, and stages

Just like other approaches, an ARP proceeds in different stages. Broadly speaking, it starts by the analysis of an existing situation, goes onto a stage dominated by action, and concludes by an evaluation of results. Moreover, it is generally a cyclic and iterative process (see “Conducting an iterative process, based on reflexive analysis,” page 45). This process is very similar to the one described traditionally for management processes: analyze, plan, act, monitor, and evaluate.

The relative importance to attach to the “action” aspect and the “research” aspect divides ARP practitioners and thinkers (see Box 1, “Tensions in an action-research partnership and risks of derailment,” page 46). This explains the different emphasis accorded by each stakeholder to the creation of knowledge, the resolution of the problem, and the strengthening of their skills and knowhow to allow them to become more autonomous and self-sufficient. Ultimately, these different perceptions have an impact on the different stages of ARP (Box 2).

In any case, two stages seem to be especially sensitive: the start and the end of the activities. At the start, it is necessary to clarify the expectations of the researchers and the other stakeholders, to verify whether the issue is suitable for action research – rather than just suited for classical research or expert intervention. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that the stakeholders share common values that will allow them to tackle the problem at hand and that they are ready to participate in a partnership where they will have to respect some common rules.



Box 2. Different ways of designing the stages of an action-research partnership's approach

Mc Kernan (1988) emphasizes the problem encountered by the stakeholders and describes these seven stages: (1) the definition of the problem, (2) the identification of the objectives, (3), formulation of ideas and hypotheses, (4) drawing up of an action plan, (5) implementation of the action plan, (6) evaluation of the action, and (7) taking decisions based on the results obtained.

Liu (1992) insists on the process of creating knowledge that will be useful for action and identifies five stages: (1) formulation of research issues taking modalities of action into consideration, (2) drafting of hypotheses for implementing solutions, (3) implementation of solutions including memorization and archiving of activities, (4) diagnosis of the final situation and evaluation of results, and (5) drawing up of conclusions relating to the hypotheses with the formulation of research findings in a communicable form.

For its part, the conclusion of an ARP should be prepared beforehand, as stakeholders can always claim that their expectations have not been met, thus justifying the start of yet another cycle. In other situations, established collaborations can lead to unfavorable relationships of dependence justifying the continued presence of researchers as indispensable.

In this book, a division in three phases will be used, as shown in Figure 2:

- The launch or exploratory phase;
- The problem resolution phase, with several cycles divided into different stages;
- The concluding phase with activities coming to a stop.
-

It is worth noting that the usual sequence of these cycles and stages is liable to be disrupted by specific events such as the introduction or withdrawal of a stakeholder, an uncontrolled conflict, or a change in the rules of how the ARP is functioning.

Duration

The duration of an ARP can vary widely. In some situations, the ARP continues for several years with greater or smaller intervals between two stages of the same cycle or between two cycles, especially when the problem at hand is complex.

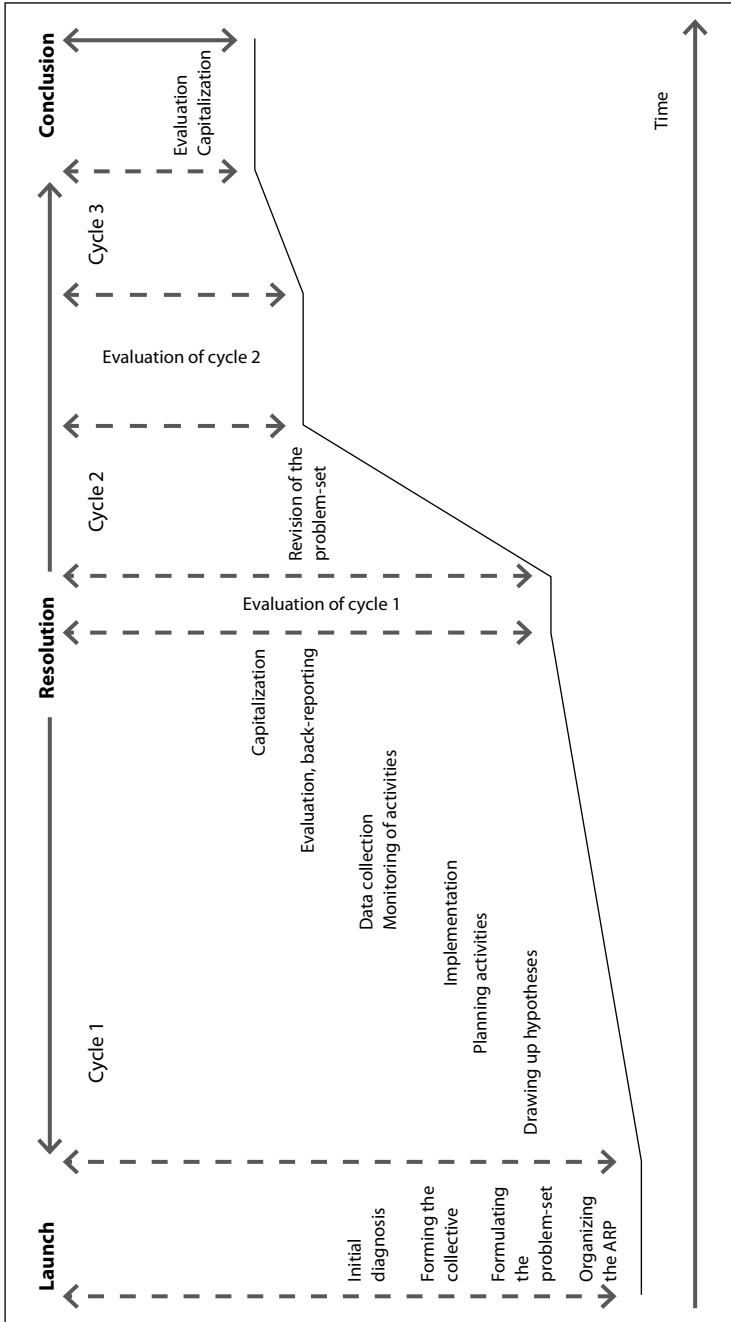


Figure 2. Evolution of an action research in partnership with its phases, cycles, and stages.



An ARP can sometimes be completed within a few months. This is only possible in situations with relatively simple problems or if the launch phase is part of other activities and is based on an initial diagnosis already completed and on a collective of stakeholders who already know each other. In fact, going from an expression of stakeholder concerns to an analysis and a shared definition of the problem always requires time.

The launch phase

▀ Specifying the context using a participatory diagnosis

An initial diagnosis is often necessary – and not only for researchers – to collect enough information to assess the situation before embarking on any action. From a systemic and multi-disciplinary perspective, this will traditionally concern aspects as diverse as biophysical conditions of agricultural activity, diversity of farms, functioning of sectors and supply chains, the organization of space, and the socio-economic environment. It will also include consideration of individual or collective actor strategies, i.e., the resources they use to attain their goals, by a detailed look at stakeholder alliances and existing or potential conflicts.

There are several methods to conduct a diagnosis (see Box 3). If necessary, the diagnosis can be partially conducted in an external manner,

Box 3. Diagnostic tools

Several methods exist for conducting a diagnosis:

- The study of documents such as reports, articles, maps, write-ups, and work plans produced by research centers, producer organizations, development agencies, businesses, etc.;
- Conducting surveys (monographs and statistical surveys), for example, to describe stakeholder practices, specify technical and economic performance, understand the structuring of space;
- Conducting interviews, for example, with an open, semi-open, or closed questionnaire or with focus-group techniques, to be able to understand stakeholder strategies, analyze the discourse, and by comparing other interpretations;
- Collective analysis of the situation with the stakeholders to arrive at a shared diagnosis, by the use of workshops mobilizing the knowledge of the participants, of rapid participatory diagnostic modalities (such as rapid rural appraisals), whose methods have been refined in development-research programs, or by organizing specific events such as study tours or field trips to delve deeper into the subject.



using surveys and polls, but it should, above all, include the participation of the stakeholders involved. What is important to highlight is the way the stakeholders perceive their situation.

The tendency to indefinitely stretch out the diagnosis and thus delay the definition of priority work themes remains a constant risk and stakeholders of development-research programs often fall prey to it. In an ARP, researchers have to accept the idea that the initial diagnosis could be incomplete or partial, but that there will be many opportunities to revise and improve it later.

▮ Building a collective actor

All the stakeholders identified during the initial diagnosis may not want to participate in an ARP if their participation is, for example, not necessary with respect to the problem at hand, not realistic in terms of resources required, or not desirable due to existing conflicts or pronounced asymmetries. An effort is thus necessary to identify key stakeholders and potential partners to help create a working collective that can attain the goals decided upon.

Verspieren (1997) goes further and refers to the creation of a collective actor. The initial proponents of an ARP, whether they be from research organizations or from other organizations, usually have atypical positions or profiles in their parent institutions. Their role at this initial stage is to convince and win over those stakeholders whose participation is essential to the process and others who will be able to defend or protect the project without necessarily directly participating in it (see Part 5, page 181). Indeed, an ARP process is delicate and many forces can oppose it, especially in its early stages.

This working collective can be structured in different ways: the constitution of homogeneous working groups (by stakeholder category) or mixed working groups, establishment of steering committees, or by the definition of a communication strategy. These points will be covered in detail in Chapter 6, “Enrolling stakeholders and the place of researchers” (page 79).

▮ Drawing up a problem-set

At the start, stakeholders have concerns that they normally express in such statements: “With our production costs, we cannot make profits on our sales” or “Increasing the area under cultivation reduces areas for animal grazing and thus negatively impacts animal husbandry.” However, they gradually draw up a more accurate problem-set and



arrive at a collective reasoning through exchanges and discussions that highlight cause-and-effect relationships.

But what is more important is that the stakeholders are led to formulate questions that project them into the future. These questions are expressed in the form of strategies to implement: “How to reduce our production costs and identify more remunerative markets?” Unlike their initial concerns, such questions can be dealt with effectively and thus they are useful. They allow solutions to be developed which are within the stakeholders’ reach and which do not depend only on external actors or factors (as was the case for input costs and population growth).

This work of building a common vision, establishing a common language, and identifying questions that can be dealt with is a precondition to embarking on the resolution phase. Several exchanges may be necessary to achieve this. At the end of this phase, the problem-set may still be a little vague and ambiguous. It is in the following stages that it will be fleshed out, even shifted progressively to other domains the stakeholders may think more relevant.

These three aspects – drawing up a diagnosis, building a collective actor, and drawing up a problem-set – are strongly interactive, as shown in Figure 3, and are therefore conducted in parallel in an ARP approach.

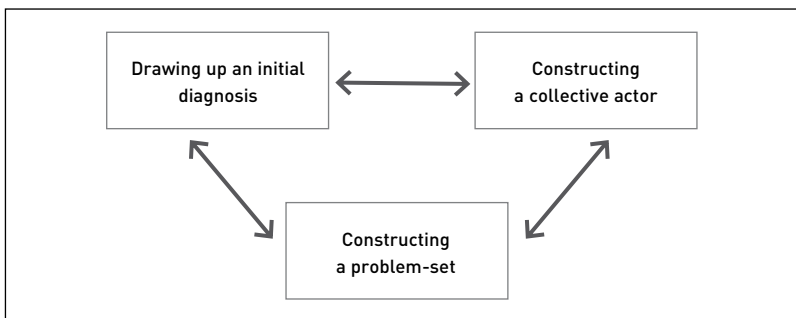


Figure 3. The launch or exploratory phase of an action research in partnership



▮ Should an action research in partnership process be launched?

At this stage, stakeholders can and should ask themselves whether an ARP is really suitable. They should do so by answering the following key questions (see Chapter 7, “Context and issues,” page 97):

- Do stakeholders share values and goals sufficient enough to proceed?
- Does the problem-set’s complexity require an ARP approach or can it be solved by implementing simpler approaches, for example, by mobilizing expertise, conventional research, or appropriate training?
- Does the collective really wish to produce new knowledge useful for the action?

Researchers who have participated in this phase can also verify if the problem at hand actually relates to their respective areas of expertise. If not, they can withdraw from the project, decide to hone and extend their skills, or try to rally with the nascent collective researchers with the requisite skills.

▮ Organizing action research in partnership

Intense negotiations between stakeholders bring to a close this launch phase. They focus on organizing the collective work to be done for clarifying the issues, identifying solutions, then following up on and evaluating the actions.

It is a matter of determining who decides what, who does what, when, where, or how.

The negotiations lead to a proposal for the functioning of the ARP that is acceptable to all. This proposal can include: goals to be attained, a general calendar including a schedule for meetings, rules for conducting meetings, creation of steering and/or arbitration authorities, agreements for accessing and disseminating information, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The proposal for the ARP’s operation can also include a first budget that distributes costs by stakeholder and specifies the sponsorship of the have-nots, especially the producers. It is the right time also to reflect on the criteria that will determine the ARP’s conclusion (see Chapter 4, “The disengagement phase,” page 49) and thus to emphasize its temporary nature.

Together all these agreements and mechanisms form a “transitory organization” of the ARP, liable to be refined over time (for more details about the governance and management of the ARP see Chapter 6, “Enrolling stakeholders and the place of researchers,” page 79).



They can be written up in a document approved by all parties. In some situations, stakeholders can even formally state in writing their expectations and responsibilities. Sometimes a special event, such as an official workshop or ceremony, is arranged to symbolically mark the effective launch of the resolution phase.

The resolution phase

The resolution phase is certainly the longest phase, mainly because it consists of several sequential cycles. While the first cycle's initial stages can be confused with the reflection stages of the launch phase (Figure 2), the same cannot be said of the subsequent stages which address the identification of solutions, their implementation, and the evaluation of results.

▮ Producing hypotheses

Defining a problem-set leads to the drawing up of hypotheses. Hypotheses of actions to be undertaken can be generated which can serve to identify solution paths that are acceptable to the stakeholders, and those that are not. Research hypotheses can be generated that will serve to orient knowledge creation. Those referring to specialized scientific debates need not be shared with other stakeholders. Shared or not, it is nevertheless important that the hypotheses be fully compatible with the stakeholder collective's stated goals.

▮ Identifying realistic solutions

Once the problems and questions have been properly set, the following step, which aims at identifying solutions, can take place. On the basis of the common goals, one has to go progressively from what is desirable (the "dream") to what is possible, taking the local context into consideration, what is achievable, given the collective's constraints. Priorities are to be discussed; not all solutions have the same impact on the problem and not all have the same degree of urgency. It is a veritable art to understand correctly the room for maneuver that stakeholders have in planning their actions.

Very soon it becomes clear that the internal power relationships between members of the working collective are an integral part of the process. What's more, so are the external power relationships with other actors who want to influence the process and defend their own agenda and interests. It is therefore essential to identify opposition



and resistance to change, on the one hand, and factors and forces that enable them, on the other.

Thus, the steering mechanisms of an ARP (see Chapter 8, “Governance mechanisms,” page 107) always include a strategic dimension when positioning the ARP in the interplay of actors so that difficulties and oppositions that are raised can be overcome.

▮ Planning the activities

To implement the identified solutions, i.e., to conduct an experimentation that has the goal and the potential to transform the lives of the stakeholders involved, the working collective should carefully plan its activities.

It is a matter of asking, for each activity, who does what, when, where, how, and using what resources.

If the stage for identifying implementable solutions and for defining priorities is properly conducted, the planning will be relatively easy. Each participant should be able to be heard and to take the initiative to help plan activities. To make this possible, special facilitation techniques may be used: round tables, small working groups, individual cards to note a participant’s input, etc.

After having drawn up a program of activities together, the facilitator can ask each participant to recap, in his or her own words and in front of the others, the tasks that he or she will be responsible for, thus making the commitment public. This also helps identify any difficulties the participants perceive so that they can be addressed.

At this stage, the question of funding the activities and the allocated tasks can lead to prolonged deliberations. If possible, this issue should be addressed in a fully transparent manner. Does everyone have the resources necessary to undertake the activity? Will the participation of everyone be free? For example, farmer representatives often expect that a system be established to compensate farmers for time spent in collective work to the detriment of their farms.

▮ Carrying out experimentations and monitoring them

ARP activities can take various forms in different situations. For example, conducting specific surveys and studies to gain in-depth knowledge about a problem, conducting field experiments with farmers, establishing new ways of organizing farm work or managing a farmers’ organization, creating new tools for collecting and disseminating



information that will be useful to stakeholders, or working out new methods for cooperating with institutions to manage a resource.

Experimentation in an ARP is therefore both technical and organizational in nature. It does not necessarily require the researcher's presence; some experiments can be planned and carried out without his or her participation.

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between (1) activities centered on producing knowledge to strengthen collective reflection or improve decision-making capacities and (2) activities designed to transform the reality of stakeholders with greater or smaller degrees of irreversibility. The importance of one type of activity vis-à-vis the other depends to a large extent on the concerned ARP's cycle (Figure 2). The first cycle can emphasize knowledge production, with subsequent cycles focusing on activities designed to transform reality, or vice versa, depending on what seems important to the stakeholder collective for attaining the objectives agreed upon.

During this stage, the intensity of work can vary depending on the stakeholders, the work sites which can be clustered together or dispersed, and the frequency of contact between the working collective's members.

There are two determining elements (see Chapter 7, page 97, and Chapter 11, page 143, which cover ARP operationality in detail using examples from Brazil and Burkina Faso).

The first element is to set up a system to monitor activities. This helps analyze technical or organizational experiments and facilitates subsequent presentations of findings and results to the entire collective. In addition to monitoring the results of the experiments themselves (technical, economic, social), one also has to monitor the process generated by experimentation and this in its surroundings (behavior and reactions of the involved stakeholders).

The second element is the establishment of a communication strategy, both for serving inter-member needs and for communicating with the exterior. This helps maintain a sense of togetherness, builds trust, and eases mutual adjustments along the way. This strategy can include meetings, distribution of information notes, and joint visits to ARP sites.



▮ Analyzing, evaluating, presenting, and capitalizing

The end of an ARP cycle is marked by analyzing the results of the activities undertaken by the collective of stakeholders (see Part 4, page 157). As per ARP principles, these are the activities that generate new knowledge on technical subjects, on the effectiveness of types of organization, or on stakeholder strategies.

This self-analysis or reflexive analysis (see Chapter 3, “Conducting an iterative process based on reflexive analysis,” page 41) often takes the form of sessions during which findings are reported back. These sessions help compare the results obtained with initial hypotheses and understand changes that took place during the cycle. While traditionally researchers are the ones to report back to the other stakeholders, it can also be done by the latter to the entire ARP collective, or even to actors who are not part of the collective.

The cycle’s end also includes another type of evaluation: that of the ARP process itself. The following questions are asked: Did the approach and methods used help meet stakeholder expectations? What are the new skills developed by members of the collective? What improvements can be made to future cycles?

In addition to self-analysis, it may be useful to plan an external evaluation. This can be commissioned by the institutions to which some ARP actors belong or by the funding entity.

And, finally, the researchers should capitalize the acquired knowledge by writing it up. Some of these documents will be destined for the stakeholders, others, such as scientific articles, for the research community. Depending on the particular case, this knowledge can relate to various aspects such as a close understanding of ground realities (for example, land management or supply-chain development), stakeholder strategies observed in action, technical subjects encountered during the ARP (such as an agricultural technique or a new way of organization), and the ARP approach itself as an innovation process. These written reports will also provide an opportunity to give a voice to stakeholders who otherwise have little say, and thus reflects one of the possible goals of an ARP, that of empowerment (see Chapter 1, “Criticisms and evolution of action research,” page 23).

▮ Starting a new cycle

At this stage, the stakeholder collective can decide to start a new cycle to further pursue a specific question or because new questions have



emerged. If such is indeed the case, the problem-set is revisited, goals adjusted, and hypotheses reworked the cycle can begin on an updated basis.

The disengagement phase

It is important for researchers to know when to disengage themselves. This will avoid the collective becoming permanent and a substitute for the organizations concerned and prevent the activities from continuing indefinitely by becoming part of a mere routine. Such disengagement is not incompatible, however, with the fact that the ARP can lead to a new permanent organization which will provide sustainable solutions to the questions raised initially. Some authors refer to such a situation as “institutionalizing” action research.

In all cases, the disengagement can be sensitive and risky. It augurs well to discuss this phase at the very start of the ARP using clear objectives and a calendar drawn up *ex-ante*. This calendar will be subject to modifications during the process by the ARP governance authorities, either to change the date of the conclusion of activities or to introduce a new ARP cycle.

▮ When to end an action research in partnership?

An ARP concludes when its goals are attained. Thus the collective has to fix goals that can be achieved independent of the actions of other actors. This also implies that indicators which allow the results obtained to be characterized or quantified be used whenever possible (see Part 4, page 157), usually during a cycle’s evaluation.

An ARP also concludes when the collectives actors become autonomous enough to no longer require the support provided to them during different interventions. They do so by acquiring knowhow and developing new skills during individual and collective learning processes initiated by the ARP.

Autonomy means that if the stakeholders find themselves in a similar situation, and encounter problems of the same type, they will be in a position to solve them without calling for outside help. However, it is difficult to characterize and evaluate how much they have learnt. This can be best estimated by gauging the perceptions the stakeholders themselves have of their new abilities.

Very often, a special, symbolic event marks the researchers’ disengagement. This helps convey the results of the ARP to a wider public



and allows acknowledgement and recognition of the efforts of each member of the collective. This event can take the form of a workshop, a ceremony, or a celebratory meal.

And, finally, a crisis may bring the ARP to an unexpected conclusion. Some stakeholders may feel that activities are no longer within the ambit of the framework negotiated during the launch phase. The researcher may feel that issues and experiments have gradually moved away from his or her area of expertise. Members of the collective may perceive the relationships within the collective to be too biased to allow them to present their point of view or to participate in the decision-making process. Some members of the collective may believe that the democratic values behind its founding are not being respected and that some members are manipulating the ARP to their own ends or towards goals not disclosed initially.

In such cases, the main objective is to negotiate a disengagement that creates the least amount of ripples, emphasizes the accomplishments resulting from the ARP, and does not endanger any possible future working relations between the stakeholders.

An unpredictable course

An ARP's course as described up to now seems relatively predictable and even somewhat reassuring. And, in fact, it seems to differ little from what usually happens during a conventional participatory research process: where, the researchers have firm control over the planning of tasks and the calendar of activities. But past experiences tell us (Hocdé *et al.*, 2008) that such a situation rarely prevails in the case of an ARP, especially when the problems are complex and the stakeholders involved many.

▮ Difficulties of building together

The launch phase, however long, is not always successful in finding a common vision and shared goals between the stakeholders. Participants often find it hard to deviate from the usual “political correctness” or the good intentions expressed initially during the few collective workshops taking place in the launch phase.

Some stakeholders, in particular those from outside the area (and thus very often the researchers), lacking an intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground or of the stakeholders involved, can underestimate simmering tensions or overestimate capabilities. Moreover, the



parties that an ARP hopes to bring together (producers, researchers, or institutions) are sometimes so distant from each other that gaining a mutual understanding is very difficult.

It is generally only in action that the stakeholders' values and strategies surface and manifest themselves in the midst of the collective (see Chapter 2, "Main justifications," page 31). Tensions and the capabilities of the stakeholders for experimentation are revealed. Does this producer have the necessary material resources, time, or the social capital required to conduct an activity? Does that technician have the required room for maneuver or is he or she likely to put his or her institutional hierarchy in some difficulty? Can this researcher really mobilize the knowledge and knowhow necessary to help resolve the problem at hand? It is only in action that these questions become real. Their answers can call into question preconceived notions and initial predictions and projections.

▮ Changes experienced and crises

With the activities by collective members having such a revelatory role, it is not unheard of, in an ARP, for some stakeholders present at the launch phase to withdraw completely or reduce their involvement significantly, for others to assume a more prominent role, or even for new stakeholders to enter the collective. These dynamics change balances all around and can require a modification in the problem to be resolved and in the planning of activities.

It is important to evaluate these changes collectively, in particular in the ARP's steering mechanism, to understand their future implications for the collective. It is a matter of asking questions such as: Are the observed changes for the good and can they contribute to identifying more realistic or effective solutions? Or are they detrimental on the whole and risk diverting the collective to issues or solutions less acceptable by a part of the collective?

In addition, an ARP is subject to frequent crises. A crisis can be triggered by, for example, an inflexible position taken by a stakeholder provoking strong reactions, a conflict between two parties that originated in a different context but is now overflowing into the collective, or by a dramatic reduction in participation by some stakeholders, thus risking derailing the adopted approach.

These crises should not be considered as abnormal occurrences revealing an unsuitable choice of an intervention method. In fact, they

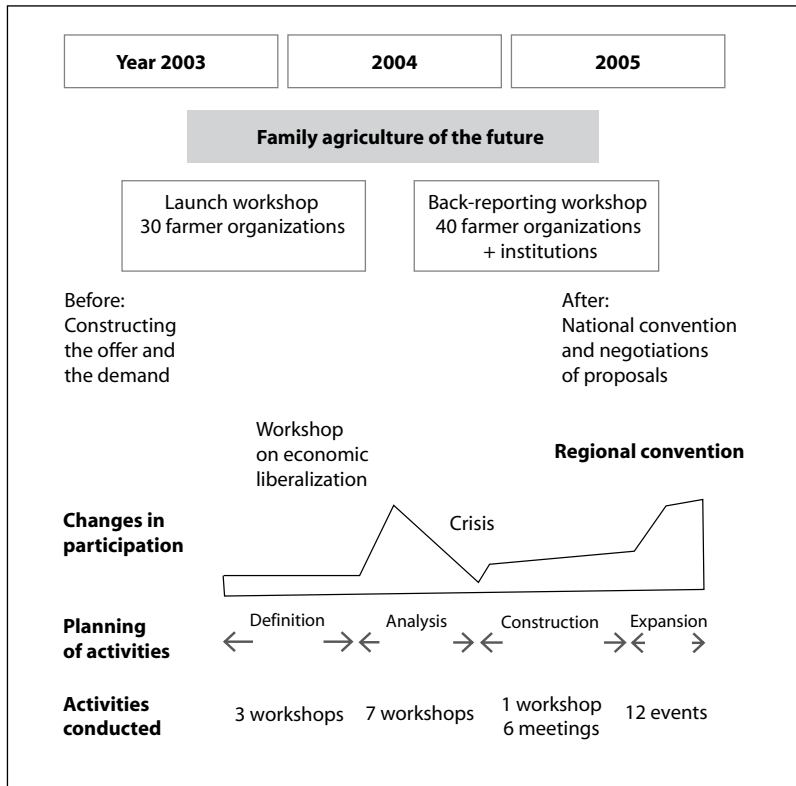


Figure 4. Chronology of constructing a proposal for farmer organizations in Costa Rica hit by a crisis. Source: Faure et al., 2007.

can even serve to reveal stakeholders' true positions or highlight problems not perceived during previous stages. That said, it is imperative to overcome a crisis as soon as possible otherwise it may trigger the eventual death of the ARP process.

Hence there is no point in denying the existence of crises or underestimating them. On the contrary, they should be anticipated as far as possible via strategic analysis of the stakeholders and, more importantly, mechanisms to manage them should be put in place. Various mechanisms can be used, for example, appropriate powers granted to the steering committees to change unsuitable rules and to take real-time decisions, nurturing of interpersonal contacts to quickly grasp the reasons behind a crisis, or meetings in small groups to help build consensus.



Figure 4 shows the course of an ARP conducted in Costa Rica with farmer organizations interested in planning their agricultural future. It clearly shows the growth in farmer participation during the course of the ARP process and, in particular, the role of a significant crisis. This crisis was overcome by modifying the methods of working and a recasting of the ARP's governance system.



Conclusion

The ARP is part of a family of approaches that aims at involving researchers and other stakeholders together in conducting research. In this book, ARP is defined as an action research that has the triple objective of producing new knowledge, resolving a problem confronting the stakeholders, and building the capacities of these stakeholders so that they can become more autonomous and self-sufficient.

An ARP is based on four principles: a combination of a will to change and a research intent, the dual objective of resolving a problem and advancing fundamental knowledge, a concerted effort of researchers and stakeholders on the ground, and an ethical framework negotiated and accepted by all.

If an ARP's proponents follow the principles enunciated in this part, they will fulfill the minimum conditions necessary for its eventual success. These principles are, however, not a recipe for a good ARP but only guidelines for developing a process and steering it successfully, avoiding some of the many potential potholes.

An ARP is action-oriented. On the one hand, it aims to transform the stakeholders' reality and, on the other, it produces knowledge about the process of change.

The knowledge produced is local and contextual and can thus be appropriated by the stakeholders.

The participation of stakeholders having an interest in the resolution of the problem becomes real. It improves the understanding of the problem and engages the stakeholders in the execution of subsequent activities.

An ARP requires everyone to recognize the knowledge of others and its potential to help resolve the problem.

A common language and shared values are necessary for building a collective of stakeholders from different backgrounds and for putting in place various strategies.

The entire process is based on reflection and the questioning of attitudes and practices. This helps participants develop skills and knowhow.

The process is iterative. It allows the systematic testing of concepts, methods, and interpretations arrived at during initial research cycles. They can then be refined and the process updated.

An ARP has three distinct phases: a launch phase, a phase for resolving the problem, and a disengagement phase signifying the conclusion of the ARP. Nevertheless, it is a flexible approach, and can be moulded to the requirements of local action. It involves diverse stakeholders in complex issues with a large number of parameters that change fast and sometimes chaotically. Consequently, an ARP's course is rarely smooth, with a succession of regular stages and cycles that can be easily planned. Indeed crises form an integral part of the process.