

Innovation and development in agricultural and food systems

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Chapter 9

Action research in partnership and emancipatory innovation

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Summary. This chapter shows why and how researchers associate with non-researchers actors engaged in the transformation of reality in an action research in partnership (ARP) in order to build a knowledge production mechanism with them. An action research in partnership arises from a meeting between an intention to conduct research and a desire of actors for change within the framework of negotiated partnerships. It can be seen as an innovation because it involves significant changes in research mechanisms, most notably of their governance, methods and practices. The mutual learning of the actors involved in this process improves their capacities to take decisions, explore, and act together. Thus, the actors use their empowerment for the future, which is the basis of sustainable development.

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Innovation can be described as a capabilities-building process, as defined by Sen (2009), i.e., one that improves the capacity of actors to take decisions, explore and act together. As several authors (Rancière, 1991; Boltanski, 2011; Guespin-Michel, 2015) have noted, this empowerment is reflected in an improvement of the actors' autonomy, in other words in an operational, collective and individual emancipation. Indeed, in the field of science for development, participatory research is deemed to be an ethical approach (de Santos, 2009) by which a mechanism can be constructed for producing knowledge with the actors engaged in the transformation of reality (Dulcire, 1996), and not for producing knowledge about non-researcher actors or for imposing a solution designed by researchers on them.

Linking research activities with social demand originating from farmers, support services, policymakers, supply-chain actors and consumers requires significant changes in research mechanisms and in the practices of all concerned. It is a matter of strengthening the dynamics of collective learning, in contrast with approaches built around the supervision of farmers supposedly guided solely by technical rationality.

This broadening of scope leads to the following questions:

- How to make all the actors work together?
- What role should be played by the research community?

By engaging in collective processes of action research in partnership (ARP), rural actors and researchers become partners in a process of shared research. The overall goal of the ARP is to strengthen the individual and collective capacities that drive the innovation processes of the actors involved, with a view to their emancipation. ARP fully associates farmers and other actors in a process of change, which requires interactions between the technical, social and organizational dimensions. Since their own needs and practices are included in this way of doing things – instead of only

the points of view of the institutions that are providing support to them –, actors are no longer objects of study or passive beneficiaries.

The complexity of social interactions and contexts of intervention argue in favour of ARP, in which collective research and action are based on reflexive mechanisms constructed with the actors. While this research practice claims to be both ethical and methodological, it is not ideological. It positions research at the interface of knowledge production and action. The act of taking a social issue and translating it into a joint research project structures the ARP. It is a demanding approach that cannot be improvised and in which common sense is not enough. This form of research has its own paradigms, hypotheses, methods and tools, which are based on experience and a constructivist attitude.

In this chapter's first part, we present a brief state of the art of approaches that involve non-researcher actors in the production of knowledge and the design of innovations. The second part presents the work of constructing an ARP that has as its goal the emancipation of all actors, including of the most marginalized. Finally, in conclusion, we return to the functions of the ARP as an emancipatory approach. We illustrate our observations with two text boxes that describe implementations of ARP.

38. A brief state of the art

If you want truly to understand something, try to change it (Lewin, 1948).

Social science research has, at least since Lewin (1948), been developing and theorizing practices aimed at involving all actors in the construction and conduct of their mechanisms of study. Research and development, participatory research, clinical research, action research, and collaborative research are all terms that reflect this effort. Indeed, all over the world and in different situations (companies, hospitals, education, agriculture, etc.), researchers have found that their proposals are often rejected, circumvented and at best modified by non-researchers. As a result, a number of researchers wanted to better understand the reasons behind these instances of resistance to change. Thus, Lewin observed that when actors are involved from the beginning of the research process, they implement the co-developed solutions more readily. This was the birth of action research, which aims at change in addition to the production of knowledge. Its goal is thus to promote modes of democratic participation to enhance the actors' capacity to work collectively, deal with complex problems, experiment and develop shared visions of a future and desired world. One of the main outcomes of this work is the formalization of the principle that reality must be modified in order to know it better and to improve it (Freire, 2005).

This line of thought is behind the various research practices that encourage interactions between actors. Collaborative research thus makes it possible to bridge the divide between researchers and non-researchers in an aim of sharing objectives, methods and results. Participatory research, often associated with social innovation, mobilizes all the actors in the production of knowledge and therefore aims to increase their ability to acquire skills and expertise (Anadón, 2007). For its part, intervention research has the objective of solving problems for which research is deemed necessary. It is contextual and aims to produce actionable knowledge.

Action research in partnership (ARP) refers to multi-actor collective processes at the scale of the actors' territories in order to respond to social needs that could not be

met via markets and social policies (Richez-Battesti *et al.*, 2012). It aims to make visible the invisible (de Santos, 2009) in order to build alternatives and generate knowledge on complex and interdependent physical, biological, economic, social and cultural phenomena. ARP can originate from two sources: non-researchers themselves or the research community. The engagement of local actors and researchers gives rise to a true partnership, such as those sometimes established between the State and private companies to stimulate innovation (Dhume, 2010). Farmers and their organizations thus move from being mere objects of study to being true project stakeholders. Such a partnership requires a pooling of resources, tangible and intangible, to achieve a common goal (Storup, 2013) and it aims to strengthen the capacity of all actors to act and to leverage the knowledge that each of them possesses (Bosc *et al.*, 2015).

In a perspective that goes beyond Lewin's original approach to action research, the fostering of partnerships involves setting up new spaces for action and interaction between researchers and other actors, where a common language, projects and new practices can be developed. Each ARP implements mechanisms adapted to the specificities of the situation, depending on the problem to be addressed, the system of actors, the urgency, the uncertainties and the trajectories of internal and external relationships.

38.1. The different practices and experiences of action research in partnership in agriculture

In the agricultural field, the failure of the linear model – from researcher to extension services to producer – in which the farmer is considered to be a simple passive receiver to which the researcher transmits knowledge via advisory services, has favoured the emergence of different forms of participatory research, including ARP (Chercheurs Ignorants, 2015). ARPs in agriculture generally focus on the co-production of innovations by involving local actors as soon as possible to define the problem (Chia, 2004; Dulcire *et al.*, 2008; Faure *et al.*, 2014). These ARPs all have the same goal: a change in the reality where the stakeholders are actually active. The ARP thus originates from the meeting between an intention to conduct research and a desire for change on the part of local actors, within a framework of negotiated partnerships that allow different actors to play recognized roles and to co-build innovations likely to better address their concerns (Faure *et al.*, 2014). The negotiation process that is then established between the actors gives rise to a shared ethical framework, which defines the parameters of action of each of the ARP's stakeholders (Vall *et al.*, 2016). This practice of ARP also allows the actors involved to examine the conditions that are at the origin of the problems being addressed, especially those pertaining to inequalities.

The ARP translates an epistemology that relies on an ethic of the other by questioning the position from which research is conducted (Paturel, 2010). The basis of this questioning is not decided upon *a priori* and arises from the heart of the ARP process itself. ARP is a way to make sense and to anticipate (Paturel, 2015); it is a constructive friction between the different rationales of the (Soulard *et al.*, 2007). It allows the evolution of socio-technical networks (Callon and Ferrary, 2006) on which the process of change is based. It is the link between knowledge for its own sake and knowledge for action, and between the genericity and uniqueness of the research outcomes.

More concretely, ARP entails the implementation of specific activities by researchers and other actors for different expected outcomes (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1. Activities to be carried out during action research in partnership (ARP).

	Activities to be carried out by local actors (farmers, technicians, etc.)	Activities to be carried out by the researchers
Analysis	Identifying the actors and the organizations, the know-how and the phenomena involved Formalizing the problems and choosing together the levels of analysis and action Studying the possible trajectory	Understanding the complexity of situations (technical, economic, social, political, scientific, cultural, legal dimensions) Identifying practices and know-how of local actors Identifying the balances of power and alliances
Action	Building ARP governance mechanisms Fostering synergy between research and development Setting up experiments Producing actionable knowledge and consolidating know-how	Building researcher teams Formulating the issue identified with the actors into a problem Setting up distancing mechanisms (monitoring committee, etc.) Communicating through documents, articles; popularizing, etc. Developing an engagement and enrolment strategy
Expected outcomes	Solutions to problems Learnings Management of complex situations Capacity to acquire expertise and to experiment	Actionable knowledge and area of validity Intervention methods Innovations at different scales

The ARP approach is applied and ‘involving’; it is research for and in action, in which researchers and other actors influence the course of events in a continuous manner.

38.2. From innovation to emancipating partnership

The ARP is undertaken within the framework of particular apparatuses. Foucault (1994) defines an apparatus³⁰ as a system of relationships established between heterogeneous elements, such as discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, laws, scientific statements, etc. These mechanisms make it possible to construct collective strategies adapted to contexts and situations, modify the system of relationships through social and collective arrangements – and not just through rigid technical ones –, and to formalize and manage relationships between actors.

In an ARP, participants and researchers jointly define a common problem and the manner in which to address it, implement alternatives and then evaluate the results, then use them individually or collectively. They thus find themselves in a sharing attitude and enjoy relationships of equality, sometimes in deliberations and decision-making, sometimes in action. Four principles guide this partnership engagement:

- scientific knowledge is not superior to other types of knowledge, local knowledge must be taken into account effectively;
- research must lead to action, i.e. it must address a given problem;
- research is carried out in projects (including the definition of the problems and the objectives, the implementation of actions and the evaluation of the

³⁰ In French, *dispositif*.

outcomes) implemented jointly by all the actors;

- the partnership must be effective, with responsibilities negotiated and shared by the various participants.

Launching such ARP processes is a complex undertaking. Indeed, they require the mobilization of many actors and dialogue, for which researchers and the other partners are not always prepared. The partnership construction phase is crucial to an ARP; it takes time and resources. Furthermore, the conduct of this partnership must be based on flexible and modifiable contractual agreements, in which each party has designated rights and duties. In certain situations, an ARP and a classical research undertaking, oriented towards the production of technical references, can work in a complementary manner. Box 9.1 illustrates both the time taken to build a partnership and the creation of an ethical framework.

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Box 9.1. Action research in partnership (ARP) in Burkina-Faso

The work we have done (Vall *et al.*, 2016) in western Burkina Faso since 2005, in the context of various research and development projects, has enabled us to formalize the ARP approach by putting it to the test. It was a matter of modifying the reality with the farmers, livestock breeders, agricultural advisers, technicians of decentralized government ministries and municipalities through the co-conception of socio-technical innovations.

We experimented with and implemented new cultivation techniques (combination of crops, conservation agriculture), livestock husbandry activities (dairy farming, livestock fattening, draft animals), and collective management of natural resources (drafting of land charters) and of compost production. A first organizational innovation consisted in creating a local committee that brought together a village's farmers and researchers and technicians (village consultation committee). This innovation was then fine-tuned and generalized to nine other villages, and provided inspiration to public authorities within the ambit of the national decentralization policy.

We worked with more than ten villages and 100 farms. In a first experimental phase, in two villages, we co-designed more productive and sustainable agropastoral systems, by taking recourse to the principles of ecological intensification by (re)thinking the combination of livestock husbandry with crop cultivation at both the farm and village levels. Agropastoral field experiments with farmers were an important tool.

In general, the co-design of innovations requires the ARP to function with a long-term perspective (Figure 9.1). A first phase allows the exploration of the problem and the solutions, builds trust and enrolls the actors. A second phase focuses on the co-design of innovations through the production of actionable knowledge. A third phase allows for an assessment and for the triggering of a new ARP cycle or for the negotiation of the disengagement of the researchers. The capacity to innovate of non-research actors begins strengthening during the second phase and allows actors to become progressively independent and self-reliant.

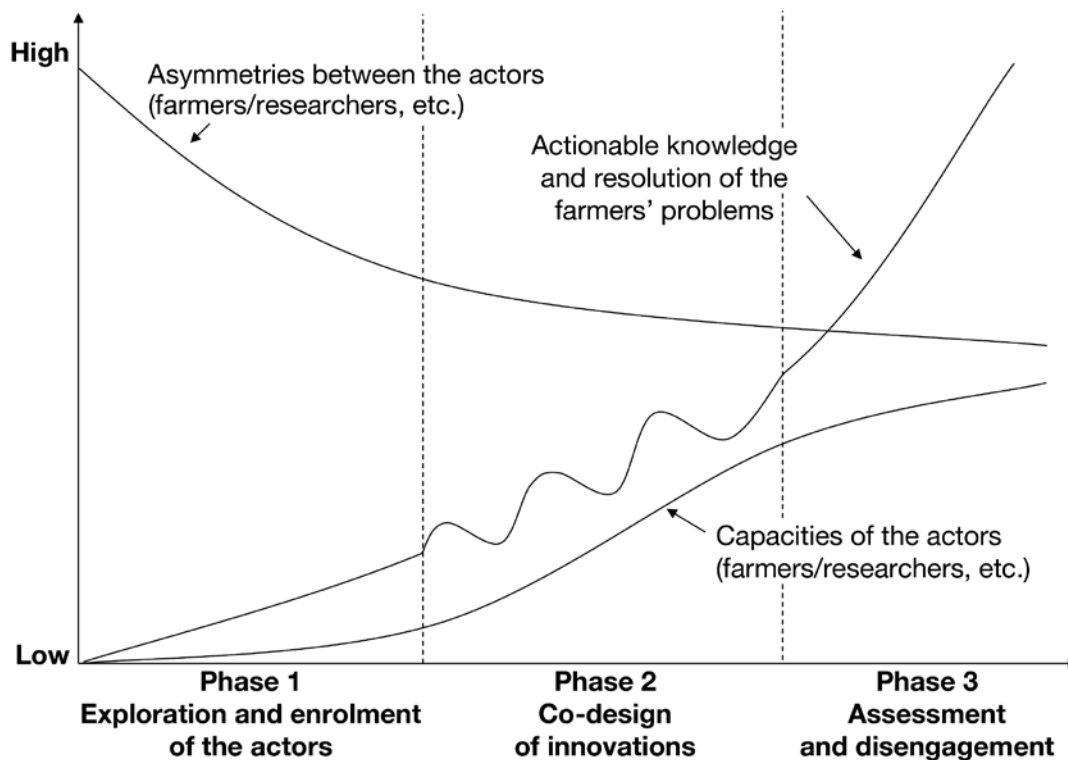


Figure 9.1. Phases and dynamics of production of the results of an action research in partnership (Vall *et al.*, 2016).

The village consultation committee facilitates the production of a common language between the actors in the field as well as the joint formulation of development strategies. It is also a mechanism for managing relations with researchers and other stakeholders in territorial development. It is a factor of emancipation (Charbonnier, 2013).

As for the research community, this mechanism allows it to develop an ethical framework and to set up agropastoral experiments (and define their themes and choose the volunteers to manage them). It is also a place to present and discuss results and to mediate priorities.

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39. An action research in partnership built and negotiated collectively

The researcher engaged in an action research in partnership (ARP) must learn to let his research objectives evolve and to think up new research mechanisms and forms of cooperation. The questions that he must ask himself, as stakeholder of a process of change and in relation to the other actors, can be formulated as follows:

- How to conduct research that addresses the actors' issues and how to develop a commitment to action?
- How to actively involve farmers and the other participants in the ARP, in the definition of problems, the design of the ARP mechanism, the implementation and co-management of activities, the comparison and correlation of different sources and types of knowledge, the analysis of results, and finding ways of appropriating and deriving benefits from them.

39.1. Participation cannot be imposed!

Actors do not step forward themselves to take part in an ARP. Instead their participation results from an effort of awareness-raising and construction between the researchers and the other actors. One of the objectives of the ARP process is to build relationships of reciprocity and equality between actors (Coenen, 2001). This partnership is not imposed by an administrative bureaucracy just because ARP is popular and therefore mandatory (Coutellec, 2015; Dhume, 2010). Even though the researcher accompanies the actors throughout the ARP process, it seems that he or she too needs to learn to become truly functional (Dulcire, 2012). The balance of power is however not shared equally between researchers and the other actors, a situation that can lead to consequences in terms of domination, increase in inequalities, power relations, symbolic violence, which must be revealed and managed (Bourdieu, 2004). It is thus up to the researcher to develop his ability to listen, translate, and question himself. The collective dynamics rely on the building of trust between the various actors and the researchers.

39.2. The need to construct a common language

Soulard *et al.* (2007) note that if researchers and the other actors stick to their own respective languages, a common illusion can result and lead to a fiction and, ultimately, generate friction, undermining the cooperation necessary for the smooth conduct of the ARP. The construction of a common language (Akrich *et al.*, 2006) is a precondition for the ARP's success. De Santos (2009) describes this stage as necessary; it creates mutual understanding of different experiences without destroying the participants' respective identities.

This common language makes it possible to agree on a representation of the existing situation, on objectives to be achieved, on actions to be carried out jointly, as well as on rules of functioning, coordination and evaluation. Researchers and non-researchers then become potentially equivalent actors (Coenen, 2003), taking decisions and modifying the situation together.

39.3. Agreeing and learning to act together

As part of the ARP mechanism, a relationship of mutual trust is gradually built up, promoting the acquisition of knowledge, know-how and inter-personal skills necessary for action. It is on the basis of this relationship of trust that actors can work and take decisions together (Dulcire, 2012). In some cases, partners can formalize these mutual commitments in the form of a contract, which specifies the conditions for collaboration and the functions and roles of the different stakeholders (Chia *et al.*, 2008; Vall *et al.*, 2016). This contract promotes the creation of synergies and pooling of resources for effective joint actions while letting the participants maintain their independence and autonomy.

An ARP encourages the actors, including researchers, to question themselves and change the ways of acting and thinking. It forces them to participate in reciprocal learning and to acquire self-confidence by co-managing activities. Participating in an ARP allows participants to train themselves by and while undertaking actions, rather than undergoing training first so that they can act later. These learnings make them more resilient in the face of uncertainties, a necessity for dealing with the future. The result is a mutual emancipation of researchers and non-researchers (Rancière, 1991).

However, the co-construction of common objectives, followed by the

implementation of actions to achieve these objectives, can provoke confrontations and reveal disagreements between the actors participating in an ARP. These confrontations can then be discussed and resolved through joint reconstruction. Sometimes, however, this discord can lead to the failure of the collective process, and thus of the project being undertaken by the ARP. These potential failures can in themselves build up the actors' capacities for future collective action.

Finally, in the ARP, the transition from the 'I' to the 'we' (production of a common language, co-construction of a common project, followed by its joint management) is followed by a return to the 'I', as concerns the use of the common results (articles, technical practices, forms of organization, etc.), individualized derivations of value, depending on the contexts and needs of each of the actors involved.

39.4. Tools and mechanisms for governance

The actors use tools to undertake the ARP's activities: production of a language, establishment of a common project, setting of rules of functioning and coordination, planning, follow-up, and the evaluation of the actions. These tools can be of various types: data collected from plots, reports of meetings, revenue and expense statements, partnership contracts, collaborative role-plays, simulation models, maps, etc. They can be designed by the actors themselves, or originate from other experiences, and be therefore exogenous. In the latter case, the actors have to contextualize them and adapt them to their situation. These tools supplement reflection and collective action. They help develop strategies, define actions, and determine the necessary short-term course corrections. While Box 9.1 emphasized experimentation with farmers, who also constitute tools for ARP, Box 9.2 shows the importance of training tools.

The ARP is part of a mechanism that is itself managed through the use of tools, such as a management committee, a scientific committee, a working group, an action plan, a monitoring and evaluation matrix, etc. The management committees that coordinate the life of the project are responsible for external communications and mediations in case of conflict, facilitate the work of the actors and evaluate the results. Chia (2004) notes that in ARPs, as in traditional research activities, scientific committees encourage the necessary distancing of researchers and reflexive action to generate valid scientific knowledge.

These tools and mechanisms constitute what may be called the *technology of the governance* of ARP (Vall *et al.*, 2016). They can be supported, as in the case of Burkina Faso (Box 9.1), by the prior co-construction of an ethical framework that specifies the rules of engagement of researchers and local stakeholders.

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Box 9.2. Acting together to build up the capacity to innovate of rural communities in Colombia

To make ecosystems sustainable, the capacities of collective management and creativity of rural communities have to be strengthened. In the Colombian context of post-conflict reconstruction (peace agreements signed in 2016), different rural communities requested training that is more suited to their needs in order to respond to local challenges. In the framework of a dialogue of knowledge, for a peaceful coexistence of communities and a sustainable and equitable economic development, educational institutions and farmer organizations⁽¹⁾ have jointly set up the project 'Universities-communities dialogue to strengthen leadership and creativity skills

towards sustainability in three different rural contexts (Afro-Colombian, Amerindian and Peasant)’.

This training was designed and implemented using an ARP approach. Its objective was to strengthen the capacities of innovation of the concerned rural communities so that they could design, implement and evaluate projects meant for their well-being, in their different territorial contexts. This ARP was structured around two major activities:

- training actors so that they can implement cultural, social and productive development projects for the well-being of their communities;
- strengthening participation within communities in order to improve their collective functioning, their autonomy and the coexistence of different groups.

Participants (60 men and women in 2015) were chosen from within their community based on their commitments, while respecting a diversity of ages, with the aim of strengthening the local capacities of communities for an effective autonomy (Sierra *et al.*, 2010; Candelo, 2014). The topics covered are summarized in Figure 9.2.

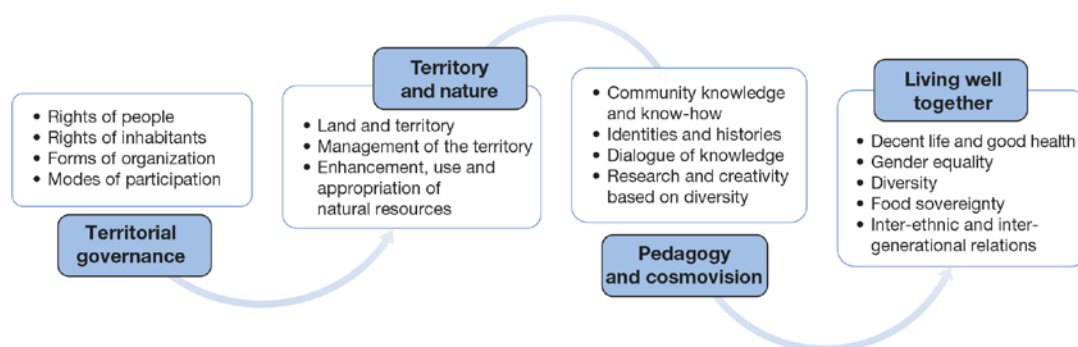


Figure 9.2 Topics of the training of rural Colombian communities.

The training was based on Freire’s (2005) principles of critical and creative pedagogy and popular education, with a view to empowering actors and co-constructing knowledge. These principles include a range of methods, such as individual presentations, debates, discussions, workshops, artistic experiences and individual and collective work. The main themes of these courses were:

- identification (how was it before, how is it now?);
- problematization (what has changed, and why?);
- the project (what should we take up or transform; what creative community projects need to be developed?);
- the implementation of these creative projects with the participants’ communities.

In this framework, the participants identified, through interactions with the researchers, problems or situations requiring improvement in their community. They proposed alternatives by coming up with creative community proposals, with due acknowledgement to each participant for his or her own work. The lessons learnt during these co-constructions helped to strengthen the communities’ capacities for collective work and creative innovation, and to provide elements for the creation of a

continuing education program entitled 'Rurality, Equity and Diversity' to be offered in other rural areas. At the end of the ARP, a diploma was given to the participants, which served as a form of recognition.

1. Corporación de Estudios Educativos, Investigativos y Ambientales (CEAM), Consejo Comunitario Mayor Asociación Campesina Integral de Atrato (COCOMACIA), peasant and indigenous organizations (Kichwua, Muruy y Siona) in Putumayo, WWF Colombia, Universities of British Columbia, Aalborg and Antioquia.

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40. Conclusion: towards a creative partnership for supporting change

Action research in partnership (ARP) is an approach that aims to remove the scientific domination of the researcher over the non-researcher. To do so, it mobilizes several disciplinary fields (social sciences and biotechnical sciences) and combines several types of constructivist and systemic approaches. The ARP requires the research community to adopt a specific posture in order to help participating actors build their own knowledge as part of a reflexive process and thus strengthen their individual and collective capacities, and no longer be mere recipients of standardised knowledge. These new capacities lead to more autonomy for participants, who can thus respond better to the challenges of sustainable development.

Thus, the ARP is above all conceived as a democratization of the scientific research approach, allowing the inclusion of actors with a wide range of cognitive abilities. It helps make the participation of these various actors more symmetrical because it can also include those who are generally excluded from political and economic decision-making. The ARP also urges other better informed actors to take into account local knowledge and methods of organization that are usually overlooked. This observation refers to the major difficulties encountered in implementing a partnership approach with different social groups, among which are often the most marginalized (Paturel, 2015).

Finally, the ARP can also inform the social criticism that shapes the different controversies on the links between science and society or between knowledge production and public action. More generally, it is part of the dynamics of debating the role of scientific expertise and the desired evolution towards good territorial governance. The empowerment of the rural actors constitutes a stimulating approach to link the concept of sustainability with those of justice, social solidarity, recognition and emancipation.

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