

TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATION FOR SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Around the CoOPLAGE pathways

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Chapter 7

Supporting participatory processes in territorial governance: The researcher’s “risky” stance

Testimonials from Brazil, Tunisia and New Caledonia

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Based on various testimonials from researchers involved in accompanying large-scale participatory and transformative projects, this chapter identifies and discusses some “risky stances” and frictions that researchers may encounter, as well as the strategies they develop to cope with them. The chapter shows that the researcher’s stance, understood as his/her personal positioning in terms of theoretical and methodological choices and interpersonal interactions with other stakeholders, is a key element in the dynamics of the participatory process, even though it is very often neglected. The chapter brings valuable contributions for developing the reflexivity of researchers and project managers regarding their own role in transformative participatory processes.

Setting up participatory research for natural resource management is not a neutral act, particularly when it aims at democratisation and/or local governance (Crémin *et al.*, 2018). The role researchers play in this process is worth noting and may be an issue since, as D’Aquino and Seck Sidi (2001) point out, “every development programme brings its own implicit political ideology”. This is true both for development research projects (Olivier De Sardan, 2022) as well as for participatory research projects when embarking on strategic planning, development schemes, governance mechanisms or water policies.

As researchers involved in these participatory research projects, we provide guidance and support to organisations or individuals who are locally involved in decision or change processes. This “support” is an integral part of action research projects, can take a wide variety of forms beyond the mere production of knowledge and may include providing advice, developing methodologies, leading the process itself, and so forth. For researchers, being a stakeholder in these transformative participatory projects often involves negotiating both what is expected of them from the other players (funders, project partners and scientific managers) and their own position in the research and support system (Daré and Venot, 2016; Barnaud *et al.*, 2016). Researchers may find themselves torn between their epistemological and ethical research framework, their scientific objectives and the very diverse expectations of the stakeholders with whom they work (funders, state and political stakeholders, managers and citizens, etc.).

While the analysis of participatory processes at work in natural resource management can fuel critical reflection on existing frameworks for public action, it can also be particularly difficult to maintain this same analytical and critical status when involved in a participatory research project aiming at transformation. The epistemologies and ethics of management sciences (David *et al.*, 2012), intervention research (Buono *et al.*, 2018) and even intervention sociologies (Herrerros, 2009) have largely shown that researchers involved in action research or transformative processes cannot maintain the axiological neutrality¹ (Weber, 1965) characteristic of descriptive analytical social sciences. They are themselves stakeholders in the process, sometimes even the initiators of a change project, and work with other actors to transform the social world, not just observe or describe it. This research stance is thus not neutral, and all the more so in participatory research projects that are strongly shaped by public funds for development and/or driven by democratisation and/or transformation of resource governance.

We define the stance of the researcher who is supporting participatory schemes as his/her personal positioning, expressed through his/her theoretical and methodological choices (Charmillot, 2021), inter-personal relationships and "alliances" that she/he manages to build (Akrich *et al.*, 2006), or the way in which she/he perceives knowledge and the ways in which this knowledge is constructed and shared (Mazzocchetti, 2007). We consider that this stance is likely to evolve over time, including during the course of a research project (Ballon *et al.*, 2019; Brun *et al.*, 2007), and that it is linked to an inter-relational dimension that takes into account the position that the researcher occupies in relation to his/her research objects, interlocutors, field, as well as his/her peers and the institutions that structure and/or fund his/her activities (Alphandéry and Bobbé, 2014).

This chapter aims to present the dynamics of the researcher's stance when involved in a participatory process that supports governance and to discuss the difficulties and frictions she/he may encounter. We take a reflexive approach to analysing the case of researchers involved in large-scale participatory processes (large population, transformative impact) to co-construct regional governance schemes on the topic of water or associated public policies. Our focus is mainly on the field of water democracy through the exploration of the researcher's position within participatory processes that have an impact on institutional decision-making. This chapter does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of possible stances. It aims instead to show, using a few examples and critical accounts, how the diversity of implicit or explicit expectations and objectives of the participants, project sponsors and researchers can generate biases and changes in a researcher's stance over the course of a project, and beyond that, how this stance can then be taken into account. We elucidate these biases in order to highlight the tensions they can generate in terms of research stances, the responses provided and the ensued learning. Building a scientific stance while being involved oneself is often a matter of individual trial and error, and we feel it is necessary to create forums for sharing experiences.

We have taken three large-scale citizen participation projects, in Tunisia (see chapter 5), New Caledonia (see chapter 18) and Brazil as examples. These projects have in common:

1. Axiological neutrality, or science that is free of value judgements, as theorised by Max Weber (1917), is a methodological stance adopted by the researcher who attempts to become aware of his own values in order to reduce in as much as possible the bias that his own value judgements might cause in the research at hand and in the interpretation of the results.

- the fact that they were initiated and are supported by governments;
- the desire for strong citizen involvement, in contexts where participation is not a given;
- processes which generate proposals that can challenge the authorities in place, authorities with whom we work.

We begin by describing the specific features of the processes that have been implemented. Using testimonials and feedback from the researchers involved in these projects, we then discuss the different roles or expectations perceived by the participants with regard to the researchers, and the objectives and expectations specific to the researchers, in order to elucidate the stances and roles of the researchers during the process, as well as any chosen or imposed consequences. Finally, based on collected testimonials, we illustrate how involvement in these projects can constitute a “risky stance” for researchers. We conclude by stressing the need for researchers to reflect on their actions, and the need to develop tools for clarifying objectives and preparing consultation, as well as ways of guaranteeing and monitoring the role of researchers.

►► **Case studies: participatory processes inspired by CoOPLAGE, strongly linked to political decision-makers, funders and citizens**

The three participatory projects given as examples and carried out in the South by the authors of this chapter² focus on transformative processes such as the development of public policy (policy guidelines, action plans) and support for the development of local and decentralised systems of governance. The CoOPLAGE approach (see chapter 2) was used in a different way for each of these projects.

Presentation of the case studies

These projects, which are at various stages of completion, aim to:

- improve the involvement of local stakeholders and citizens in policy-making on water and other natural resources;
- promote shared diagnoses and action plans at the local level;
- highlight the attractiveness that such involvement can have for decision-makers at the regional and national level.

The underlying assumption of all these projects is that the participation of citizens and local stakeholders in the development of public policies improves efficiency, and facilitates the implementation of sustainable actionable solutions and functional governance systems.

The Sertoës project in Brazil for the sustainability and hydric resilience of north-eastern territories

The Sertoës project is a research-action project designed to help engage stakeholders in the co-construction of a multi-level territorial water governance model, using an innovative multi-actor process designed and led by the researchers themselves. This process is fuelled on the one hand by the production of knowledge on the state of water resources and their territorial uses, and on the other hand by the strengthening

2. Caroline Lejars and Nils Ferrand took part in the project in New Caledonia; Guillaume Lestrelin, Julien Burte and Nils Ferrand in the project in Tunisia; Veronica Mitroi, Isabelle Tritsch and Julien Burte at various stages of the project in Brazil.

of stakeholders' capacities. The project management approach is based on the implementation of an iterative and progressive process, which involves both the production of cross-sectoral and multi-scale expertise on water resources, and the empowerment and support of stakeholders in territorial planning and water resource management processes. This process allows for information to be produced, learning to take place and stakeholders to be mobilised around the three phases of the project:

- diagnostic or analysis of past/present trajectories,
- co-construction of sustainable and resilient future trajectories,
- and construction of a methodology and implementation of a pilot linking a Territorial Intelligence System (TIS) and a territorial water governance system.

The project was launched in March 2021 for a period of three years, and at the time of writing was still in the defining and testing phase of the local governance model.

The PACTE programme in Tunisia to help vulnerable areas adapt to climate change

Tunisia's Programme for Adaptation to Climate Change in Vulnerable Territories (PACTE) was launched in the wake of the Arab Spring, at a time of democratic transition and the strengthening of the role of local authorities (Dafflon and Gilbert, 2018). It was initiated and implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture. This programme aims to plan and finance actions that promote the sustainable management of natural resources, the development of the agricultural and forestry sectors and the strengthening of local governance in six rural areas. A group of fifteen-some French and Tunisian researchers is involved in guiding this programme through a sequence of projects spanning more than eight years, leading a co-design process for structuring multi-stakeholder platforms for territorial diagnostic, citizen debate on development issues, concerted planning and monitoring-evaluation of investments and their impact. These platforms should in particular act as supports for large-scale local participation, in a context where there are few or no intermediary organisations that are functional and recognised as legitimate by local communities. The programme was launched in 2018, following two successive small-scale projects (in 2012 and then 2014) which helped to co-design a methodological pilot for the territorial diagnostic and planning approach. The PACTE programme is now in its final stage (i.e. investment and implementation), which will run until 2027.

Supporting the construction of a Shared Water Policy in New Caledonia

A team of researchers provided methodological support over three years in the form of a project cluster, initially to train stakeholders at the request of the Northern Province (2016 to 2018) and then, at the request of the New Caledonian government's services (2018 to 2019), to provide methodological support for the co-development of the country's water policy and, finally, to evaluate the process. Support in the development of the policy is detailed in chapter 18. A shared diagnostic process was set up for all the issues and target sectors, under the guidance of an interdepartmental government group, followed by a broad participatory planning process, which was finally prioritised and broken down into action plans published in a framework document. The researchers proposed the methods and materials, trained some facilitators, supported the process and assessed its progress. The process took place in a politically tense context in which referendums on independence were ongoing.

The researchers' contribution to these case studies

For these three processes, the researchers' contribution was organised around six major components of the participation process, although they were not necessarily sequential, and sometimes not anticipated or planned for at the start of the projects:

– Project initiation and set-up. In all three cases, the project was initiated at the request of local government players. The researchers were more or less involved in the initial framing of the projects, with strong involvement in the Brazilian and Tunisian cases, where the researchers steered the process; involvement in New Caledonia was very marginal;

– Support for the co-designing process of the participatory approach to be implemented. In all three cases, the research teams capitalised on existing knowledge, which they used to facilitate a partnership debate on issues of participatory engineering, and institutional and procedural design for citizen participation in water resource management and/or regional planning;

– Training and capacity-building in diagnostic/planning processes. In all three cases, the research teams developed and implemented a “training-action” programme designed to build the capacity of both administrative pilots and regional agents from agricultural departments who are responsible for setting up and running multi-stakeholder platforms (see for instance chapter 5);

– Support in carrying out a participatory diagnostic, followed by the formulation of an action plan and an implementation strategy. The researchers help the stakeholders to collectively produce a strategy and an action plan, then to prepare its implementation, taking care to ensure compliance with the principles initially defined (e.g. compliance with the principles set forth by the project, such as transparency, local governance, inclusion & equity, etc.);

– Process monitoring and evaluation and its impact. The researchers assist in setting up a mechanism to “systematically” monitor participation, which is itself partially participatory (see chapter 10), and conduct research on the impact of the consultation process in terms of individual and collective learning and the reconfiguration of power relationships;

– Scientific and technical expertise. In each case, the researchers also carry out (at different stages in the process) complementary studies and expertise on, for example, issues linked to the development challenges identified with local stakeholders (e.g. studies on local industries, on the state of natural resources, agro-ecological experiments, on governance, economic analysis of services, design of information systems, etc.). This expert support is not necessarily planned or anticipated. The researcher accompanying the participatory process may also find him/herself called upon to provide support and expert advice in his/her own areas of expertise.

For each of the projects, the researchers took part in these six stages of the participatory process. However, these stages were not necessarily linear or sequential, and those involved in the process evolved over its course, including the researchers, authors of this chapter. Between experiences in previous projects, training carried out prior to project initiation and the learning acquired as the project progressed, each of us found ourselves in different positions evolving throughout the projects. Table 7.1 provides a summary of all the projects and phases of participation.

Table 7.1. Players involved and researcher participation phases for the three case studies

| | New Caledonia | Tunisia | Brazil |
|--|--|--|---|
| Financing | Government | Government, AFD (French Development Agency) and FFEM (French Facility for Global Environment) | Government and AFD (French Development Agency) |
| Brief objective | Design and implement the country's water policy | Strengthen local governance mechanisms and design and implement territorial development schemes in rural areas | Co-construct a model for multi-level territorial water governance |
| Regulatory and institutional framework | Development of the country's first water policy, called the "Politique de l'Eau Partagée" (Shared Water Policy) | Democratic transition and policy for the decentralisation of public action (towards the regions and municipalities) | Water policies: work on institutional design to decentralise water management and promote increased cross-sectoral management |
| Duration | Construction of the action plan and policy guidelines over 12 months (2018-2019), training had already taken place (2016-2018). | Cluster of projects over eight years (2016-2024) | Cluster of projects (from 2018) |
| Period (stages) | i) Diagnostic (three months) ii) Participatory process (forum + local workshops) (three months) iii) Finalisation of action plans and master plan (three months) iv) Validation by Congress | (i) Methodological development (2016-2017) (ii) Scaling up to six pilot areas (PACTE 2018-2024) | (i) Diagnostic (2018-2019); (ii) Pilot (2020-2023); iii) Loan/scaling up (2024-2029) |
| Local initiator | Head of Agriculture and Customary Affairs in the Government of New Caledonia | Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Commissions for Agricultural Development | Secretariat for Water Resources and Funceme (Fundação Cearense de Meteorologia e Recursos Hídricos) |
| Main partners | Operational support by the MISE (Mission interservice de l'eau – Interdepartmental service on water) | French and Tunisian agricultural research and teaching institutions | Secretariats for Agrarian, Environment and Urban Development (sanitation) |
| Other participants (number) | Customary stakeholders, Municipalities, Farmers, Mining industry, Drinking water manager, State services, NGOs, Consumers group, Citizens (1/600 Caledonians) | Tunisian agricultural administration offices and agencies (4); municipalities (7); civil society organisations (3); citizens (around 4,000 for the diagnostic phase) | Municipal teams, civil society organisations |

| | New Caledonia | Tunisia | Brazil |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Main methodological challenges | Setting-up a methodological approach to ensure the participation of 500 people during a 3-day forum, followed by citizen workshops in the field | Co-designing a methodological approach to reconcile regional planning and large-scale participation | Co-designing a methodological approach to reconcile multi-level water governance and regional planning |
| Researchers' contribution | Occasional involvement in methodological design and support for workshop facilitation in the five stages | Ongoing involvement in the six stages described above (from set-up to monitoring and evaluation) | Ongoing involvement in the six stages described above (from set-up to monitoring and evaluation) |
| Participatory methods | Mobilisation and adapting of Cooplage processes/tools | Mobilisation of Cooplage and Co-Obs approaches/tools in a territorial approach (territorial diagnostic, strategic forecasting/vision, planning, implementation, monitoring of territorial dynamics) | Territorial approaches adapted from Cooplage: (territorial diagnostic, strategic forecasting/vision, planning, implementation, monitoring of territorial dynamics) |

►► Dynamics and tensions around research stances constructed during the process

In this section, we describe the ambitions and approaches shared by the various researchers involved in the three projects, as well as the different roles that the researchers took on during their projects. The contributions required of the researchers, as described in part 1, are sometimes at odds with the expectations of the participants, whether or not they were made explicit at the outset. As a result, the different roles or positions that the researchers had to assume in these projects often evolved, leading to ongoing tensions and negotiations between the roles defined with the other players (funders, project partners and scientific management), the expected roles as well as each individual's specific position.

Transformative ambitions, at the interface with the political mandate

The researchers involved in these projects all share, albeit with varying degrees or forms of personal commitment, a transformative and democratic ambition. Their aim is to enable the expression of the most diverse points of view, perceptions and interests, and particularly those of the most vulnerable, in order to help improve living conditions and the management of natural resources. To achieve this, the researchers' main ambition and challenge is to ensure a balance of power and to help reduce disparities in the ability to participate in management. In order to help participants (Sen, 1999) and facilitators build their capacity and ensure that what they have learned is sustained, researchers usually offer theoretical and applied training combined with practical activities in the field. Beyond training, it is the "quality" of the participatory process itself, for which the researcher often serves as the guarantor, that allows for a diverse range of voices and interests to come forth, thus guaranteeing a democratic process.

Aside from this shared ambition, each researcher gets involved in the process in a different manner, depending on his/her history in the field and interpersonal relationships with the partners, his/her discipline and research objectives, as well as the meaning she/he gives to the very notion of "involvement".

In the three cases mentioned above, the projects were defined in response to a government request, justified by previous contacts and projects. The researchers helped to develop project aims and organisation, and sometimes negotiated with the funding body (as was the case in Brazil and Tunisia). They positioned themselves at the interface between the transformative political mandate and their own research and innovation mandate. The next step was to design the future course of the project in detail, working with a pilot group to specify what was expected of the various players, the project stages, the resources to be mobilised and how to manage contingencies. In parallel, an analysis of the governance (sometimes included in the subsequent diagnostic) can be conducted to initiate a plan for its adaptation. Here, the researchers provide methodological support and draw attention to specific participatory issues. They also raise their own questions and enumerate constraints (time-frame, publication), as well as establish their legitimacy for the future.

Dynamic positions, with a strong inter-relational dimension

Whatever their own objectives, their original discipline or their skills may be, the participatory co-construction process requires each researcher to adopt an understanding and active approach to the expectations of the participants - project backers, funders, decision-makers and citizens - in order to take stock of the diversity of voices and interests. Participants' expectations evolve over the course of the project's implementation, during the participatory workshops and during process evaluation; although they are different and sometimes contradictory, they are also often concomitant. The researchers' contributions thus evolve over the project's phases, as does the researchers' understanding of the context and the process at work.

Here are a few illustrative examples that demonstrate how partner expectations evolve, intersect and challenge the researcher's stance throughout the transformative process.

– From supporting the participatory process to facilitating it

The researchers support the facilitation of the participatory process by training local facilitators who are acculturated and speak the language, as well as by monitoring and, if necessary, redirecting their activities. To do this, they define a training plan, which is then adapted and fine-tuned with the group of facilitators along the way (see chapter 5). At the request of the participants, the researchers can also act as facilitators themselves for various participatory workshops, ensuring a certain balance in the unequal power dynamics of exchanges between stakeholders; they may also act as workshop leaders to support the process. There is a thin line between facilitation support and facilitation itself, with partners sometimes expecting more in the way of direct facilitation.

Furthermore, as co-pilots of the process, researchers are sometimes expected by local (government) pilots to monitor and deal with any frictions and crises that may arise with stakeholders, or in connection with collateral effects. This involves rapid, contingent analytical expertise on the interplay of stakeholders, requiring direct interpersonal skills (including mediation, negotiation and conflict management) and an

understanding of the political and socio-environmental risks. They may therefore find themselves legitimising technical or social innovations that were introduced, or legitimising political decisions that attempt to “correct” asymmetries in participation through these projects.

– **Between producing and transcribing knowledge**

While, in theory, the researcher simply supports the participatory diagnostic phase, in practice, the pilots often expect them to play an expert role in supporting the production of inventories or comparisons, and studies of past/present dynamics and developments. They may find themselves in charge of study summaries, ensuring their scientific quality and therefore producing original knowledge through their disciplines. In the three projects under consideration, the researchers come from very different disciplines: agronomy, management sciences, geography, sociology and participation sciences. Depending on their discipline, their research objectives and their own publications, they may contribute complementary expertise and disciplinary competencies in addition to their skills in supporting the participatory process. In this way, the researchers themselves produce knowledge that they share with the stakeholders.

At the same time, researchers must also ensure that the diversity of stakeholders is taken into account in the participatory process. They are therefore transcribers of knowledge (Daré and Venot, 2016), i.e. spokespersons for the points of view and representations of the various participants. The stakeholders’ points of view may be different, or even in opposition to the researcher’s own conclusions; the researcher is thus in a position where she/he must manage possible divergences.

Finally, in the processes studied, the researchers bring their own field experience on what the stakeholders need to mobilise in the process (e.g. stakeholder mapping, systemic modelling, etc.). In this case, the researchers also influence the participatory diagnostic by contributing new methods for collecting, analysing, synthesising and reporting information. This methodological framework influences the participants’ approach.

– **A dual role in monitoring and evaluating the process**

In the three projects, the researchers contributed to monitoring the process and also, in part, to its evaluation. Indeed, the evaluation process makes it possible, on the one hand, to feed into and facilitate the steering or accountability of the process and, on the other hand, to feed into scientific reflection on endogenous evaluation (see chapter 10). This is conducted in part directly, and partly through the use of trained and mentored evaluation managers.

Constructing a stance while in action: a “trial and error” experiment that generates tensions

The researchers facilitating the process may have varying and multiple positions depending on their skills, their personal choices in the face of the explicit or implicit expectations of the funding bodies and project sponsors, the expectations of the participants, the different researchers’ own research objectives, the explicit roles within the project, and events. In complex, long-term projects, which often involve the professional mobility of the participating researchers, there is no single project leader. Involvement in any one activity phase may be shared between several researchers,

with co-sponsors, co-designers, co-trainers, co-leaders and co-evaluators, with each participating researcher potentially taking on his/her own stance, different from those of his/her colleagues.

In this changing, multi-actor context, researchers can find it difficult to develop and maintain a single stance. Being both "active and reflective", "facilitator and neutral" as well as "expert and referee" generates stress for participants and researchers alike. These tensions are closely linked to the need to interact actively and comprehensively throughout the participatory process, with all the partners—the risks of the process being monopolised by the local steering committees or financial backers is not negligible. In this way, each person's individual stance is built through their actions and involvement as the project progresses, and this construction often remains the fruit of individual experimentation.

From an epistemological and ethical point of view, this typically raises many questions about the relationship between researchers, the steering of the participatory process (decision-makers and politicians) and the participants in that process. During the course of the project, the functional and normative conditions of the research (Checkland and Holwell, 1998) need to be revealed in advance. These contributions and their changes need to be clarified and formalised; they need to be verbalised despite certain risks (Ferrand and Raymond, 2006), so we know "with whom" and why we are collaborating. These changes in stance need to be questioned throughout the process, and researchers need to cultivate a form of reflexivity about their own changes in stance and their contributions.

Illustrative but not exhaustive, the three example projects demonstrate that, even when previously formalised methodological frameworks are in place, this type of project requires expectations to be shared and a certain flexibility on the part of the researchers, who may have to change their stance and their activities during the course of the project. This flexibility, which is necessary for a transformative process, is not without risk for the researcher, who is involved in the long-term process and in the interrelationship with the players and participants.

► Sharing risks and lessons learned through testimonials

In this final section, we use personal accounts to show how involvement in these processes in support of water governance and policies not only generates tensions for the researchers, who are torn between various expectations, but can at times also place them "at risk", in their interactions with stakeholders and in their role as producers of knowledge. This is not meant to be a comprehensive account. The intention here is to share feedback on experiences and highlight some of what has been learned.

Developing reflexivity while in action

– How can political processes be transformed and analysed?

There are many similarities between carrying out participatory research with the aim of supporting public decision-making and evaluating public policy through a participatory process. The main difference between them is undoubtedly the aim: the evaluation of public policies has a more systematically normative aim, towards supporting decision-making, which is not necessarily the primary objective of participatory research.

Furthermore, the evaluation of public policies, whether participatory or not, is a relatively standardised activity in France. Nevertheless, when participatory research includes citizens and supports the development or implementation of a policy, it is very similar to a participatory evaluation of public policies (Girard and Hassenforder, 2019).

What is very special about the three case studies is precisely the positioning of the researcher, who is involved not only in evaluating the policy in question but also in transforming it and evaluating the process at work. The participatory research process thus generates, on the part of the committed researcher, an evaluation of the public policy that he or she is helping to transform. The need for the researcher to intervene is justified by the initial observation that the policy in question is not working properly. The results, weaknesses or inconsistencies of these public policies can be difficult to explain or make visible by the involved researcher when this leads to criticism of the policies implemented by the government partner itself, which is also the project leader. Furthermore, the process of transforming public policies, even in the sense of democratisation as such, is not neutral. The scientific and technical team may find itself putting forward citizen solutions and demands that run counter to political decisions and expectations, including those from its own project backers/funders.

In the case of Tunisia, for example, sharing the observation made by those behind the PACTE programme, within the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, on the excessively limited involvement of local stakeholders in the definition and implementation of natural resource management and rural development policies, the researchers set out to facilitate the development and implementation of a process combining a territorial approach and large-scale participation. By developing methods and tools for diagnostic and integrated planning (i.e. deliberately without constraints on the target sectors), and by strengthening the capacities of regional agricultural services to facilitate the expression of the concerns and needs of local stakeholders, the researchers and their development partners assumed that the programme would be able to generate greater interest and commitment on the part of the inhabitants of the six target regions. This assumption proved to be fully valid initially, with remarkable participation rates recorded during the diagnostic phase (i.e. around 4,300 direct participants in total, 35% of whom were women, and almost 12,000 proposals for action collected from local stakeholders, see Braiki *et al.*, 2022). However, more than a third of the proposals made by local stakeholders focused on sectors that were not eligible for support from the PACTE programme (e.g. transport infrastructure, housing, health, education, off-farm activities, etc.). Thus, many of these actions were then integrated into territorial development plans. Although this result did not come as a surprise to the Ministry of Agriculture, which was heavily involved in the various stages of the process of co-designing and implementing the approach, it still posed a major problem for them. Cross-sectoral mobilisation efforts have been made at central and regional levels, although their success has been limited; local players were made aware, from the outset of the process, of the general conditions for eligibility of the proposed actions, but ultimately, the Ministry of Agriculture now has to deal with plans that go well beyond its remit and, even more so, the technical and financial framework of the PACTE programme. In practice, PACTE contracting authorities have had to deal with major tensions, not only with local players (and sometimes even with regional coordinators) who want to see ineligible actions financed (Hassenforder *et al.*, 2022), but also with funding agencies who are reluctant to modify the financial framework at an advanced stage in the programme.

Over time, these tensions have led to frustration and, to a certain extent, disengagement on the part of some local players, partly invalidating the hypothesis made at the start of the project on the capacity to engage the parties involved.

In the end, such participatory action research approaches, although they involve a highly inclusive co-design process, can sometimes "trap" decision-makers and donors, generate major contradictions between the financial framework and the project "products or outcomes" and, in so doing, highlight major - and sometimes undesirable - imbalances in the power relationships in place.

– **How can the participatory process be evaluated and adjusted?**

The participatory process can also lead to a modification of the power games at work. The position of certain players is strengthened and legitimised, but this is not necessarily the case for all, or for the most marginal players. The researcher's commitment to the process and his/her desire to transform and democratise make it difficult to objectively evaluate the analysis of power games, or to recognise the failures or limitations of the process in very specific contexts. While the principles of "good" participation are already well theorised, their implementation does not always go according to plan. One of the tensions that the researcher has to manage is precisely the capacity to "give an account" of the limits (or possible failures) of the participatory process and explain the causes, including his/her share of responsibility. This capacity for self-criticism of the process, for which a researcher may be responsible or serve as project leader, is extremely important and may require reorganisation and reformulation of everyone's roles, more training, "course corrections", etc.

For example, the global pandemic hampered the start of the Brazilian project, requiring the work to be launched remotely; initial training could not be properly conducted, thus leading to a participatory process that was inadequately prepared. With a considerable delay, the researcher-project leader, although aware that not all the conditions for analysis and preliminary training of trainers had been met, had to act with urgency, make compromises and launch the process. These compromises in relation to what he had learnt in theory as the "best" way of organising participation had to be made in a highly politicised context with the approach of presidential, legislative and government elections. At the same time, very strong power struggles were emerging between the project's various strategic partners, and the two main Brazilian partners found themselves in a situation of heightened competition. The Brazilian project leader found this start to the co-construction process unsatisfactory. The project leader's ability to provide support was called into question and compromised by this false start. Although the decision to launch the process was not the responsibility of the project manager, but that of his Brazilian counterpart, and although he tried to sound the alarm, to correct the situation and to take a constructive look at what was not working as planned, he did not succeed in satisfying the Brazilian pilot. Paradoxically, however, the project leader's analytical capacity and critical viewpoint were appreciated, as he was asked to take on a new role in the project, as the person responsible for research reports that could feed into the dynamics with the stakeholders and also the interaction with the funder.

This example shows, on the one hand, the compromises that researchers may need to face with regard to the ideal principles of participation, and on the other hand, the limitation of the critical self reflection of a committed researcher. Because of political, financial and time pressures, participatory processes are often launched without all

the ideal conditions being met. The attentive researcher, faithful to his/her commitment, can then try to correct the situation, point out the limits, show what is not working, and better advise the pilot - even if the final decision on how to proceed does not lie with him. However, how far can she/he go in criticising without losing his/her credibility, the trust of his/her partner and compromising the whole process, or seeing his/her position in the project threatened? The participatory process calls into question the room for manoeuvre for “committed” researchers or the degree of interventionism that is possible and desirable, and can therefore lead to a change in the researcher’s position vis-à-vis the power games that are revealed or emerge during the participatory approach.

The transformative process calls for a rethink of the need for knowledge and the place of expertise

In the three cases studied, the participatory process raises questions about the knowledge needed to make decisions and define an action plan, including the production of knowledge generated by the researchers in charge of the process. Several articles have shown that the need for knowledge can be used, for example, as a lever for negotiation, or as a means of postponing a decision (Bouleau and Deuffic, 2016; Mitroi *et al.*, 2022). Conversely, in the case of the project in New Caledonia, the collective and participatory process sometimes called into question the need for information and the production of knowledge, more specifically on hydrology, river quality and biodiversity. During workshops at the local level, some decision-makers told the researchers: “*I don’t need knowledge to make decisions*”. Several participants also pointed out the risks inherent in transparency and the transmission of information. If waterholes or springs are inventoried, there is a risk of making them public and, in some cases, making them more difficult to preserve. The case of the preservation of fruit bat nests is fairly emblematic, with a refusal on the part of the customary community to publicise the location of the inventoried nests in order to limit poaching. Understanding the impact of information on the individual and collective behaviours of the participants can thus raise questions about the need for knowledge and its sharing, thus calling into question the fundamental role of researchers as producers of knowledge.

At the other extreme, in Brazil for instance, due to climate factors (i.e. the very high variability of rainfall over time and space being the main management challenge) and historical reasons (i.e. the implementation of a participatory management system for the allocation of water resources in the 157 strategic reservoirs equipped with water level monitoring systems), data is at the core of the allocation system and therefore of management. It would be unthinkable to manage without data. One of the deliverables of the Sertoès project was the design of a Territorial Information System to monitor the 100,000 small and medium-sized reservoirs in the state of Ceara and to incorporate them into a new territorial management model that includes the local level. This objective is in line with the activities of the Brazilian partner, Funceme, which for years has been developing and operating a wide range of expertise to help understand droughts through seasonal climate forecasting, mapping of various environmental factors (soil, vegetation, etc.), as well as assessing the impact of climate variability on water resources and agriculture. It also plays a role in developing decision support systems (DSS) for the water resources sector, and is involved in drawing up emergency

plans in the event of drought. The institution's excellent reputation can lead stakeholders at participatory workshops to adopt a stance of waiting for data or a technical or expert solution. Ensuring that all points of view are expressed, without technical knowledge "overpowering" others, is one of the main roles expected of researchers who lead participatory approaches.

Moreover, the researcher's "expert" stance can itself lead to bias in the participatory process, with the researcher bringing his/her own knowledge and expertise to the table. As experts in water and water management, for example, researchers themselves produce knowledge and diagnoses that they share with stakeholders and inject into the participatory process. They have expertise in their own disciplinary field, whether technical or from the social sciences, which may influence their intervention with the participants.

The question of information and expertise in the participatory process can therefore be examined from two angles. On the one hand, it is a question of informing the group, putting it in a position to make an informed decision while retaining the point of view of local knowledge and interests in a participatory process fed by expert knowledge. On the other hand, the aim is to guarantee the legitimacy of the collective decision, even when it does not appear to be the "best" decision, to prevent expert and/or political players from devaluing a solution that does not seem to them to be well argued or scientifically validated. The support approach must therefore help to create the conditions for a rebalancing of knowledge and expertise, including the researcher's own knowledge. This rebalancing is all the more important when the intervention is carried out abroad, by French or researchers from continental France, who may be perceived as representing interests other than local ones, or even as giving lessons.

Lifelong learner: continuous learning through action

All the researchers involved in these three projects share the same observation: their involvement leaves neither the researchers nor the participants "unscathed". The transformative process also transforms the researcher. All three cases required readjusting or adaptations throughout the process, in terms of the way the process was conducted on the one hand, as well as on the skills to be brought in and the needs in terms of research.

For example, in the Brazilian case, project coordination was transferred from the researcher who initially set up the project with partners he had known for a very long time, to a new researcher who arrived in Brazil at the end of the Covid crisis. As the project was delayed and the conditions for an ambitious participatory process were no longer in place, the researcher in charge of the project had to be replaced. A less ambitious trajectory, in terms of participatory actions during the pilot project, was negotiated between the partners, the donor and the various researchers involved in the project, who saw their roles redefined, but also their individual positions evolve in relation to their initial involvement. The adjustments made during the process may have generated frustration and tension for the researchers involved and those who had developed the initial approach.

Participatory projects place the researchers in a rather paradoxical situation of learning as they go, but without always having the opportunity to "sort things out" and do them again or better. This situation can initially lead to self-criticism, with researchers questioning their own ability to lead the process or the value of bringing

their own skills into the process. It is the group discussions between colleagues and the sharing of experience, as in this chapter, that ultimately enable these researchers to take a step back, adopt an analytical stance and identify the necessary learning. This learning is necessarily collective, as it is built up with others in a community of practice that enables the multiplication of experiences and meanings given to this type of commitment. The mentoring role that more experienced researchers can take on with regard to younger researchers is also important in learning participatory practices.

Involvement in participatory and support processes is also a privileged learning situation in terms of stakeholder interaction and power relationships. However, although the researcher is able to analyse and see these power plays, he/she also ends up participating (intentionally or not) in these power plays, which evolve over the long term. For example, by helping a government to “democratise” a policy, they are helping to legitimise that government, which may evolve during the process and/or be open to criticism. Over the course of the process, the researcher’s commitment may evolve in function of the changes in the balance of power, with some taking a more reflexive stance, being less active or transformative.

Lastly, the process may shape the disciplinary research of certain researchers. The collective process is a place for innovation and creativity of the researchers themselves. Participants often highlight their need for knowledge, expertise and understanding. Conversely, certain needs for expertise or knowledge may be set aside by the participants, raising questions about the positioning and even the need for the skills of some of the researchers involved. Commitment to the process, which is very time-consuming, is often to the detriment of academic recognition, which relies heavily on publications. While this approach does bring us closer to society and decision-makers in the long term, most of the researchers involved in this type of project feel that they need to take some time and step back for more reflective analyses.

► Conclusion

Aware of the scientific and normative stakes of the researcher’s involvement in accompanying large-scale participatory processes, in this chapter we have attempted to understand the researcher’s stance in relation to the projects, their trajectory in the field, as well as their interactions with other stakeholders (Daré and Venot, 2016; Ferrand *et al.*, 2021). As mentioned by Coutellec (2015), rather than freeing ourselves from these biases of involvement or ignoring them, we sought to make them explicit in order to integrate their scientific and operational consequences. In so doing, we have analysed the tensions and conflicts that arise in the construction and evolution of researchers’ stances. The testimonies and feedback shared in this chapter show that, even when we have previously formalised methodological frameworks, involvement in large-scale participatory projects in support of water and regional governance requires a degree of flexibility on the part of researchers, who may have to change their positioning and activities during the course of the project. This flexibility, which is necessary to support transformative processes, is not without risk for the researcher who invests in long-term processes. Local and global conditions, social tensions and the relationships that are (un)forged influence the construction of a scientific stance, not to mention the psycho-social factors specific to each researcher, who also has needs in terms of recognition, integration, legitimacy, security and so on. The research stance

is dynamically re-de-constructed, with experience in the field affecting not only the researcher, but also those involved in the field through their questions, formulations and expertise. This type of process is therefore a formidable source of creativity and learning for participants, researchers, funders and decision-makers. These are places for producing and transcribing knowledge, exchanging expertise and local know-how that often bring about simplifications, translations, as suggested by Zwartveen *et al.* (2021): "*Comparisons across heterogeneous communities sometimes require difficult translations and simplifications. To avoid getting trapped in one single language, we suggest nurturing and thinking with differences, learning from each other's idioms so that no one remains the same as they were at the beginning*".

However, constructing a scientific stance in action and in close interaction with funders, decision-makers and citizens is still often a matter of individual experimentation, a source of tension for the researcher. The accounts given in this chapter, far from being exhaustive, provide a forum for sharing experiences and learning. They show the need to take into account and raise the question of academic recognition of committed research with a transformative aim, particularly in terms of recognition of the specific requirements of such research and the organisation of traceability (see chapter 10). These projects also raise questions about the training of researchers in these approaches, the need for researchers to reflect on their work, and the need to develop tools for clarifying objectives and preparing consultation, as well as monitoring the role of researchers. As mentioned in chapter 9, it is also possible to get the stakeholders to work beforehand, before the start of the participatory process, on who is going to participate at what stages, with what roles, according to what rules and for what outcome. This need for transparency (and clarification of roles) also applies to researchers, especially as they can often be likened to project leaders, and the co-construction dialogue is as important as the final result.

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