



PLP'S APPROACH TO ACTION RESEARCH

BACKGROUND

The Pacific Leadership Program (PLP) is invested in building, applying and sharing knowledge on developmental leadership. Acknowledging the importance of thinking and working politically to achieve truly transformative change, PLP is committed to Action Research as a means of testing and proving the effectiveness of development initiatives in real time.

Action Research is designed to measure efficacy of program processes as they happen, allowing it to inform continued planning and operation. To be effective, Action Research requires a commitment to deep learning and a willingness to embrace appropriate change from research subjects.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action Research bridges the divide between theory and practice by utilising knowledge and experience as dynamic tools to not only improve understanding of specific issues, but also how this can be practically applied. Action Research operates in real-time through structured feedback during programmatic and project processes. Such feedback results in increased understanding of how the multiple inputs around processes, including resources, personnel and relationships, impact on outcomes. This knowledge is then integrated not only into future projects, but also those already in operation.

RATIONALE

PLP's commitment to promoting developmental change requires a deep-seated understanding of how change happens. Action Research provides the best opportunity for PLP to assist developmental change agents to 'grow by learning' by providing vital insights into complex, non-linear and long-term change processes. Through this active learning, PLP can ensure that its approach to developmental problems acknowledges complexity and operates as best-practice. To this end, PLP saw the need to create a formalised programmatic approach to Action Research.

Key Points

- Action Research provides a 'real-time' insight into complex, non-linear and long-term changes processes affecting development initiatives
- Action Research requires not only an understanding of general monitoring and evaluation principles, but a deep understanding of complex interplays of social, cultural and political environments which affect projects
- As Action Research requires thinking and working politically, for it to be effective, all parties must be equally committed to the need for flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness during the process

“To be effective, Action Research requires a commitment to learning and adaptability from all parties, most notably development agency staff and donors”



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Action Research, applied properly, holds great promise for ensuring program effectiveness and contributing to the learning of practitioners, academics and policy-makers. To be effective, however, it is critical that the following conditions are in place:

- The context behind the research and the purpose for the research must be understood by all parties, with commitment to full and honest engagement with Action Research processes.
- The contractor must provide support in coordinating aspects of research and ensuring all relevant information is accessible to the researcher, whilst remaining at arm's length from the investigative process to promote the likelihood of objective findings.
- A commitment to learning and adaptability from all parties, most notably development agency staff and donors, based not just on the findings of the Action Research, but being informed by the processes of reflexivity and transparency. In particular, donors should see Action Research as a valuable tool for ensuring program objectives are met even if this means altering inputs and outputs.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive desk-based literature review of relevant documentation was undertaken prior to trial Action Research with four programs/ initiatives: the Green Growth Leaders' Coalition; Tonga National Leadership Development Forum; Women in Shared Decision Making (WISDM) in Vanuatu and Simbo For Change in the Solomon Islands. These experiences provided insights for designing a Terms of Reference (ToR) for PLP's engagement with Action Research principles. Comment was sought from members of the respective programs on each research ToR. The comments were then compared to inform PLP's overarching purpose for Action Research, how such Action Research should be undertaken, as well as to create guidelines for a Standardised ToR.

LESSONS LEARNED

- For PLP to be effective utilisers and advocates of Action Research processes, it is imperative that PLP commit to Action Research principles in its own work. Rather than seeing Action Research as being something for PLP, it should instead be incorporated within PLP to inform and guide current and future practice.
- Ongoing political will and institutional support / cover is needed to undertake Action Research in complex political settings where there are risks associated with thinking and working politically.
- An understanding of the nature of Action Research is required by all parties. Of equal importance is identifying suitable Action Research projects, personnel to undertake the work and appropriate management and M&E processes to oversee the triangular relationships that develop between the implementing organisation, partner and Action Researcher.
- Trust and access between the Action Researcher and partner is needed. This is also required between the Action Researcher and funder, but is not guaranteed.
- The (relative) independence of the Action Researcher is essential to developing a positive collaborative relationship and perceptions of capture need to be carefully managed.
- A commitment to flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness by all participants is needed to keep pace with Action Research. Regular planning, debriefing and reporting are essential to ensure that differences of opinion are aired and resolved and expectations remain as aligned as possible.

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PLP Briefing Notes

PLP Briefing Notes summarise key findings and lessons learned from research, coalitions and other activities implemented or supported by PLP and its partners. The aim is to inform policymakers and practitioners on emerging themes and issues in PLP's current work and consider the implications of these for wider development policy and practice.

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