

Doing Action Research



Key learning and emerging principles

CEDAR Thematic paper series 02/04

Community Economic Development Action Research
Project, Department of Labour, 2002 -2003

This paper represents the views and observations of the CEDAR project team. The contents are general in nature and not designed to apply in every situation. The team welcomes comments on this paper and these can be sent to info@dol.govt.nz putting CEDAR in the subject line.

Background

In undertaking the CEDAR project over the last three years, there has been a vast accumulation of knowledge and experiences in processes and issues relating to both community economic development and the use of action research (AR) as a methodology.

A secondary objective of CEDAR right from the outset was to contribute to building knowledge about the usefulness of an action research approach for policy developments. The use of AR in this context was new and it was felt that through CEDAR, the Department of Labour could build knowledge about AR and share experiences more widely with other policy agencies about how AR works in practice.

In this paper we discuss our experiences in *doing* action research and share some methodological insights with other practitioners. The aim is to promote knowledge flows both within the public service and with the wider stakeholder community so as to contribute to a shared understanding about the use and value of using AR as a methodology. The paper is intended to be a resource for those interested in participatory research methodologies and/or using these methods in their research practice. The paper discusses AR from a theoretical perspective (what it is); how AR was implemented in the CEDAR project (how did we go about *doing* it); what are the key variables that impact on the success of an AR approach (e.g. when is it appropriate); and the value of engaging in AR for the participants.

This paper, combined with other resource papers is being considered for publishing and if appropriate disseminated via seminars and workshops.

Audience for this paper

The audience for this paper is:

- Researchers/other practitioners
- Central policy agencies
- Communities/ community groups
- Local government bodies

The CEDAR project description

In June 2000, the Labour Market Policy Group¹ (LMPG) and Community Employment Group² (CEG), both service units within the Department of Labour jointly initiated a three-year pilot project³ designed to use research as a conduit/bridge for developing a closer connection between government policy and ‘communities.’⁴ The project involved researchers, community development fieldworkers and policy analysts working with three research communities to build *grounded* knowledge about the processes of community economic development and feed this learning back to relevant policy agencies through an ongoing information exchange cycle.

As already noted, the research project involved collaboration between policy analysts and researchers within LMPG, community development workers from CEG and the three research communities and was located within a policy team. This was a significant advantage for the project as the research team acted as a conduit across all the different groups and attempted to balance their different interests and priorities.

What is Action Research?

There are numerous approaches to action research. Stringer (1996) notes that the common themes which emerge from the diverse approaches to action research “all acknowledge fundamental investment in processes that:

- are rigorously empirical and reflective (or interpretative);
- engage people who have traditionally been called ‘subjects’ as active participants in the research process; and
- result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants.”⁵

Yoland Wadsworth states that:

“Action research is not merely research which it is hoped will be followed by action! It is action which is *intentionally* researched and modified, leading to the next stage of action which is then again *intentionally* examined for further change and so on *as part of the research itself*.”⁶

¹ Labour Market Policy Group advises Government on policy issues related to the labour market to promote better economic and social outcomes. In particular, LMPG helps to enhance employment prospects, participation in the labour force, earnings abilities, skill levels, safe and productive work environments, effective migration, economic growth and social cohesion through advice on laws and policies relating to these issues.

² Community Employment Group works with communities and groups to help them achieve social and economic prosperity through local employment and enterprise development. CEG works alongside these communities and their organisations, building their capacity to plan and create positive change, leading to sustainable local economic and employment opportunities.

³ see Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the project

⁴ the term ‘communities’ is used more broadly to refer a geographically bound community such as a neighbourhood, city, or rural town as well as network of relationships based on a common interest or purpose

⁵ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research: A Handbook for Practitioners*, 1996, Sage Publications, p. xvi.

⁶ Yoland Wadsworth, *Everyday Evaluation On The Run*, 2nd edition, 1997, Allen & Unwin, p. 78.

A key part of this process is “critical reflection” - critical reflection is a form of analysis that not only explores how and why things happened but identifies the assumptions underpinning that analysis.

Bob Dick notes that evident in almost all varieties of action research are the use of a cyclic process and that the most elementary form of the cycle is of action alternating with critical reflection and that “the critical reflection is as important as the action”⁷. He also states that action research “pursues the dual outcomes of action (or in other words, change) and research (in other words, understanding)”.



An AR approach places much greater demands on those responsible for ‘action’ in the ‘research’ to be involved in the ‘critical reflection’ processes, than is common with many research approaches, where the responsibilities for action and research are separated. Consequently, action research approaches are usually very collaborative.

Elizabeth Hart and Meg Bond have developed a typology with the “aim of clarifying what is meant by ‘action research’, ... to make sense of what otherwise might appear as diverse and disconnected ways of applying action research to a range of problems and settings ...”⁸. A key point that Hart and Bond make is that an action research project may not be fixed in any one approach, i.e.

“During the life of an action research project it may shift from one type to another as it moves through the spiral of cycles”.⁹

In all of the above, there is a common thread for describing what action research is. We can sum up our understanding from various literatures that action research is typically a process of gaining improved information about a situation through a deliberate process of:

- making explicit the assumptions or theory held about how and why things ‘work’
- planning to intervene or ‘act’ to improve a and at the same time, to learn more about it
- carrying out the intervention that has been planned
- observing what happens as a result of this intervention
- reflecting on the observations with a view to reformulating the theory of what makes it ‘work’, and
- planning another intervention based on this reformulated hypothesis.

⁷ Bob Dick, *Action Research and Evaluation*, paper prepared for on-line conference on ‘Innovations in Evaluation and Program Development’, 1998. The quote and statements referred to are from p. 2 & 3.

⁸ Elizabeth Hart and Meg Bond, *Action Research and Health and Social Care*, 1995, Open University Press, p. 37.

⁹ Hart and Bond, p. 46

This action research cycle can now turn into new action research cycles, as new areas of investigation emerge. It is possible to imagine a series of cycles to show the process of developing practice or improving understanding. In all of this, the key thing to remember is that these cycles do not proceed in a neat, linear fashion. Most people including ourselves, experience and action research in a zig-zag process of continual review and re-adjustment.

Another key principle in the AR approach is that it is essentially a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people involved with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems. However, in our experience, we found that AR by itself cannot provide participants the 'means to act' and that actions taken depend largely on resources available and the organisational ability to undertake the action. Therefore in our experience, AR is a collaborative approach which can provide those responsible for the action with a better or more informed understanding which can in turn, inform their actions to resolve specific problems. To sum up, through its participatory processes, AR enables participants to:

- Investigate systematically their problems and issues
- Formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situation, and
- Devise plans to deal with the problems at hand.

In such a methodology, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does the research, but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or critical friend who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work towards effective solutions to the issues that concern them.

Action Research and CEDAR

Rationale for the methodology

The research project used the interactive social science research methodology. -action research as it served two purposes. Firstly, it allowed the researchers to set up an active reflection process, through which the project team (researchers, community practitioners and policy analysts) could explore the systemic issues that helped/hindered communities reaching their economic development goals and thereby develop solutions. Secondly, it helped promote reflective practice at all levels: within communities, within community development workers and within policy makers. By setting up such a dialogue between government and community, there was an expectation that the process would yield mutual learning for all participants.

From the Department of Labour's perspective, there was the expectation that the knowledge and understanding of community economic development processes built over time through an action research methodology would contribute at many levels including:

- Contributing to the policy makers understanding and concept of the 'real' world (Weiss)
- Enhancing the quality of the Department's policy advice and the ability to ensure that policy advice reflects the reality of what is happening on the ground

- Meeting growing demand from communities, voluntary groups, Iwi and Maori organisations for public participation in the policy process
- Enhancing community knowledge, understanding and awareness of various policy initiatives and the policy making process.

The earliest policy papers recommending CEDAR note that “action research attempts to produce positive change while advancing understanding (i.e. “learning by doing”).”

In particular, it was seen as a way of investigating community development processes collaboratively with the community involved so as to build a grounded understanding of issues and develop solutions. It was felt that the use of an AR approach enables:

- all participants to be equally involved in both the ‘action’ and the ‘research’
- the communities with an effective way to track their progress and actions. The process uses structured reflection and recording of key decisions.
- a systematic engagement in planning, action, and reflection cycles, before beginning the next cycle with more planning/changing. This results in action that is intentionally researched and reflected upon, and research that is designed to inform subsequent actions. As a consequence, change can be quickly effected, and findings can be quickly generated.
- Another key characteristic of action research is that it is critical – practices, ideas and assumptions are observed, reflected upon, and changed where necessary.

The Action Research Process

Many varieties of action research use a cyclic process. The two main types used in the CEDAR project were “plan – act – observe – reflect” or “intend – act – review”¹⁰. There were also cycles within cycles and the project team shifted continuously between the different types of action research as it moved through the spiral cycles. The myriad, and ‘untidiness’ of AR cycles which appears to have been a common experience among action researchers does not appear to be widely acknowledged in the literature read to date by the team. Consequently, it took a while for the team to realise that they were attempting to implement action research at three different levels:

- At a community level with members of each of the communities or community groups as well as the researchers.
- At the CEDAR project level, where all researchers, CEG and policy members of each team reflected on the processes, actions, assumptions underpinning these actions and observations about these actions. These reflections then helped inform our processes at the research team, community, the wider CEDAR project level and organisational /policy levels.
- At the organisational/ policy level, where emerging findings were presented to policy analysts and the Management team for discussion and debate, informing *their* action.

¹⁰ The former type is that of Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart and the latter, Bob Dick. From Bob Dick, *Action Research and Evaluation*, Paper prepared for on-line conference on “innovations in Evaluation and Programme Development”, 1999, p.3..

Even though we had some clarity in the beginning, about these range of levels, we were more successful in implementing action research at some levels and not in others. In particular, we were least effective in implementing action research at the organisation or policy level.

At the community/research team level

At the community/research team level, we began by building a strong relationship with key community members and identifying a puzzle or the imperative as the focus of our engagement.¹¹ Since we adopted a staggered approach to our work in each of the three communities, our reflections and insights from each experience was used to feed into our entry strategy for the next community. We started with ‘fuzzy’ research questions in each instance and allowed the precise issue or questions to emerge over time. Our experience in beginning with ‘fuzzy’ questions, a longer than anticipated process to identify the foci for the project, and only being able to develop very short term project plans in the early stages is common to action research. Two Australian action researchers note that:

“Some action research projects start off with fuzzy questions. The first action research cycle may provide fuzzy answers to lead to less fuzzy questions, less fuzzy answers and so on, until later cycles are able to provide precise answers to specific questions.”¹²

“Action research is emergent. It assumes a clearer form and substance as it progresses. In the later cycles, both the processes used and the interpretation developed are shaped by the understanding developed in earlier cycles. Each step generates understanding which informs the steps which follow.”¹³

Having collectively identified the issue, the next step was to find out more about it. We did this by talking to a broad range of people in and outside the community. This information gathering process took time, and each cycle of information gathering was reported back to the community and followed up with further conversations for drawing meaning and significance of the findings.

As the cycles became more focussed on following up an issue, we developed a Community Cycle Action Plan (Refer Appendix 1) to help us stay focussed, systematic and rigorous in our process. The plan-act-reflect cycle was our attempt to clarify within the team what was our intent (what issue were we planning to follow up about, what evidence were we going to gather, who were we talking to and why); what we did do (our actions); and what happened (individual and collective reflections).

¹¹ refer to the paper on Government community engagement paper for details on how this relationship was built.

¹² Ian Hughes, Planning Your Action Research Project, AROW, The University of Sydney, 2000, p.1.

¹³ Bob Dick, *Action Research and Evaluation*, Paper prepared for on-line conference on “Innovations in Evaluation and Programme Development”, 1998, p.2-3.

In the *planning* stage, the team would ask the following questions of themselves so that the rationale and assumptions underpinning these decisions were clearly stated

- What is the main purpose of this visit? Who are we going to talk to?
- Who is going to participate in data collection process?
- What data is going to be collected?

In the *act* stage, the team would document the actions taken on the basis of the planning and note:

- What was done during this period;
- Who were the people that were interviewed and why?
- What else was done? Why?

In the *reflect* stage, the team would reflect individually and collectively on both the content and the process aspects of their actions.

Content

- What were the interesting issues, puzzling issues, opportunities for the project etc?

Process

- What were the differences between the plan and the actions, what worked or did not work well, etc?

These reflections were used to inform next planning stage. These iterative cycles formed the core of the AR process.

At the wider CEDAR level

The role of the wider project team was to validate and/or challenge our analysis and interpretation. Along with the use of critical reflections, this was a key process for ensuring rigour, as in making judgements and interpretation of change or influence we were making a claim to knowledge. By placing our analysis and evidence in front of the wider team, we were inviting them to critically reflect on our claims. In reality, the wider team played the role of a ‘critical friend’, similar to the role the researchers played in the research communities.

The wider CEDAR group comprised members of the three research teams, managerial staff within LMPG and CEG, representatives from the field as well as policy staff. The group met quarterly and occasionally in between and provided a forum for surfacing key assumptions underpinning researcher's actions and interpretations as well as surfacing issues for consideration by policy. The dynamics and relationships within the group has been instrumental in its success. Even though there were some highly contentious issues discussed and debated in this group level, the members were able to work their way through these conflicts and keep moving forward.

As and when issues papers were written by the research teams, the members of the wider CEDAR group offered comment, challenged our interpretations and contributed to our thinking thereby strengthening the quality of the output.

At the organisational/ policy level

At the organisational/policy level, the engagement with CEDAR occurred as and when relevant information was available. It tended to be ad hoc and variable. As the project team built an understanding of key issues facing the community, it was captured through an issues paper which was then presented to the policy agencies for discussion and debate. As the process evolved, the team found new ways of facilitating critical reflection at the organisational level such as:

- Active scanning of relevant policy issues in order to make new links between the data generated from the community and the policy development process
- Regular update meetings with policy managers and policy teams across LMPG and CEG
- Presentations to the CEG management team in order for them to reflect on organisational practice issues

A key issue that emerged around fieldwork practice related to skills and training of fieldworkers. Increasing workload, increasing complexity of the environment meant that fieldworkers were on occasions venturing into new territory, and undertaking tasks where they didn't have the necessary skills. Involvement in CEDAR offered fieldworkers the opportunity, the time and space to reflect on their practice and make changes to the way in which they work. Through CEDAR, we were able to capture this information relating to the need for training and feed this back to the CEG management team, and implications for operational practice. This has led to CEG rethinking their current structure, and creating a senior fieldworker position, who can offer mentoring support to the younger, less experienced fieldworkers.

What were some of the methodological challenges we faced in *doing* AR?

- Field advisor's perception that AR is something they do anyway.

While CEAs expressed a range of interpretations regarding action research concepts and methods, most expressed action research as involving the skills of listening, reflecting, checking, analysing, and communicating with community groups. One CEA talked about using these skills to create guideposts that show us a “pathway through the snowdrifts”. In this context, action research is seen as a method that may help CEAs to move ahead positively in situations where the path is not clear.

Examples of how some CEAs described these useful characteristics of action research include action research as:

- the patience and discipline to reflect
- having a feedback loop in place all the time
- listening better and harder, drilling down a bit better – listening more to what is there.

When describing action research in this way, i.e. as listening, reflecting and analysing, some CEAs noted that this is “just part of what CEAs do anyway” and that these skills are integral to field work with communities.

However, some CEAs also talked about action research more specifically as a method they might or might not use in particular circumstances if it was thought to be helpful to the situation at hand. In this context, action research was described by one CEA as useful when there was enough of a “payoff in reducing the discomfort of change” (within ourselves or within a community group).

- Engaging policy in an AR cycle posed the biggest challenge for the team.

Since the methodology and its application in a policy context was new, it took the team quite a while to come to terms with it. The team spent a lot of time building the relationship with the community and the field advisors, insufficient time was spent in building relationships with the policy world. Consequently, we never really engaged the policy agencies into the mutual learning cycle set up through CEDAR.

- Challenges for all participants in *doing* critical reflection

- Clarifying role of action researchers

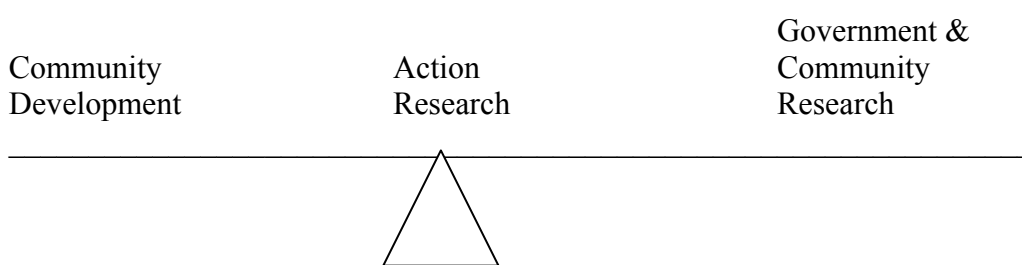
The role of action researchers in undertaking research in the area of community economic development and participating in the community's journey towards economic development has been an ongoing issue and challenge. Often there were blurring of boundaries between fieldworkers sphere of operation and the action researchers leading to some tension and occasional conflicts.

Issues relating to the role of researchers

The issues raised to date have included:

- that communities do not relate to the difference between traditional and 'action' researchers;
- the potential similarity between the roles of action researchers and community development workers (i.e. participation, facilitation and supporting/enabling change are strong components of each);
- how can the action researchers take on an 'action' research role in a community without interfering with the work of the CEG fieldworkers;
- the possibility for creating confusion in the community and the Department regarding the respective roles of the CEG and action research workers, and
- how to ensure the action researchers do not become stuck in the role of government and/or community researchers, nor take on the role of community development workers, that is, how to find and maintain a balance

As noted in the previous section, so far the researchers have been involved in more generalist type of activities, i.e. relationship - building, gathering and sharing information (i.e. acting as community as well as government researchers), and initiating some reflection through gathering and presenting information. Their role to date (shown by the χ below) and the wider discussion could be illustrated as follows:



It may be useful to explore whether this issue has arisen because an action research methodology is being used in a field with very similar principles and practices, i.e. community development, or whether it is a debate common to action research per se.

Other contributing factors to potential role confusion may be that the project is longitudinal, as is the community development process, and that both aim to contribute positively to a community's economic development.

Choosing situations where AR is likely to ‘work’

In our experience, action research tends to be sensitive to the following circumstances.

1. Action research projects need time. For most people it is a new approach and like any learning process things tend to get harder before they get easier. People come to understanding action research in their own time. The impact of "action" can also take some time to unfold. So "success" may take time; expectations of success need patience.
2. Action research projects need space. Action research is emergent, that is, what it starts off doing may not be what it ends up doing. Action research needs openness and flexibility to follow the emerging issues (and go where the energy is). Sticking to the original objective can prevent this. Action research works best with management systems that do not demand performance based on original intentions.
3. Action research projects need people and organisations able to work with ‘unpredictability’. It is often difficult to 'predict' where a project may need to go to explore the issue.

Consequently action research is a suitable approach for many situations, but not all. On the basis of the past three years and the action research literature, the CEDAR team has developed a tool for choosing suitable situations. The tool has been circulated to AR practitioners and academics around the world, and has received a positive response.

The rationale for what we developed is that our experience over the past three years has demonstrated that the key variables of an AR setting that impacts on success are:

- i. the people involved
- ii. the task or problem situation that is the focus and
- iii. the nature of the environment within which the people and focus are located.

Furthermore the key variables of the AR approach - at least from our experience seem to be:

- i. the ability of the people, the task and the environment to promote or undertake action informed by critical reflection and
- ii. their ability to promote or undertake critical reflection informed from action.

Laid out as a table¹⁴, each box contains the questions or criteria that we think will help sift out those projects, problems or situations that will respond better to an AR approach.

¹⁴ Developed by Bob Williams and Robyn Bailey, with contributions from the wider CEDAR research team, 2003.

How To Select A Suitable Occasion To Use Action Research

Focus of question	Ability to promote or undertake <i>action</i> informed by critical reflection	Ability to promote or undertake <i>critical reflect</i> informed by action
The People involved	How do the roles, divisions of labour, job descriptions permit people to act?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the people involved have the ability to reflect critically? • Do the people involved have the imperative to reflect critically (pressure to deliver)? • Are they open to laying out assumptions, being challenged? • Do they have autonomy and freedom to move within the task? • Do they have access to other people doing similar things? • How close are they to the edge of their skills? • Is the technology available to those involved suitable for critical reflection (ie able to keep in touch with each other, able to track what is going on etc?)
Task / Situation / Problem that is the focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there some action that can be intentionally informed? • Are there adequate skills, resources, time, tools that permit action on critical reflection? • Is there an imperative to act? • Is there an urgency to act? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the situation/task a puzzle (ie solutions not immediately obvious)? • Fuzzy? • Is there a strong imperative for the issue to be resolved creatively? • Is there a clear purpose for doing the task? • Is the task challenging – tough but not too tough?

<p style="text-align: center;">The Environment within which the People and the Focus is located</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the historical environment promote action based on critical reflection or other forms of norms, support resources)? • Do the environmental norms promote action based on critical reflection or other forms of , norms, support resources)? • Is the technology available to those involved suitable for critical reflection (ie able to keep in touch with each other, able to track what is going on etc)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are people allowed to admit ignorance? • Are people are pressurised into providing quick fixes? • Are there places for formalised learning processes (as distinct from technical training)? • Does critical reflection tends to be individualised and occur off the work site? • Is the environment safe for critical reflection? • Is the history of the setting about fitting old ideas into new settings (ie patterning rather than puzzling)? • Is the technology available to those involved suitable for critical reflection (ie able to keep in touch with each other, able to track what is going on etc)? • Is the wider decision making environment able to handle evolutionary projects, shifting objectives etc?
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Appendix 1

Community Cycle Action Plan
Community Cycle Action Plan (CCAP)

PLAN	ACT	REFLECT	PLAN
<p>What was planned during this period/visit?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the main purpose of this visit? Who are we going to talk to? • Who is going to participate in data collection process? • What data is going to be collected? <p>For each of the above areas, we need to state our rationale so that we be explicit about our assumptions</p> <p><u>By when?</u></p> <p>We need to have a collective understanding of these elements a week prior to the visit.</p>	<p>What was done during this period?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who were the people we met/talked to, why? • What else was done? Why? <p>What else was done in addition to the plan?</p> <p><u>By when?</u></p> <p>We need to record this as part of our data capture during the visit period.</p>	<p>What happened? Individual and collective reflections on both content and process</p> <p><u>Content</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the interesting issues, puzzling issues, opportunities for the project etc? <p><u>Process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were the differences between the plan and the actions, what worked or did not work well, etc? <p><u>By when?</u></p> <p>A week after the visit Individual reflections to be shared across the team and the team to collectively discuss them to develop and record collective reflections.</p> <p>Process reflections to be noted individually and then passed onto Robyn in conversations with her post each visit.</p>	<p>In light of this what should be done in the next phase of our visit?</p> <p>This part will then be pasted onto the planning section of the next visit cycle.</p>

