

The Place of Action Research in the Fodder Innovation Project Phase II by Dr.Tesfaye Beshah

Introduction

Action Research is a concept that is subject to various interpretations depending on the presenter. However, action research broadly and loosely, refers to the iterative interfacing of learning and experimentation. Fodder Innovation Project Phase II (FIP II) is conceived and designed as action research with the purpose of strengthening innovation capacity. It has adopted an innovation system perspective to guide the overall project. Its entry point or issue of action research is fodder scarcity, which was reframed as innovation capacity scarcity (Hall et al., 2007). Thus, the project aims at finding ways to stimulate institutional changes for fodder innovation capacity.

The first phase of FIP showed that stimulating institutional change is not just a matter of transfer of technology. In view of this, Phase II of this project was designed as an action research project that addresses location specific issues where diverse actors are involved in innovation processes.

This monthly update issue aims at highlighting the place of action research in FIP II that is underway in India and Nigeria, without going into details of learning outcomes. The next section deals with action research where it highlights its methodological route and nature, followed by modes of inquiry and relationships in action research. The last section deals with application of action research in FIP II.

Action Research: Its methodological route and nature

Action research is not a single academic discipline. It is widely understood as an approach that emerged and developed in the field, in an attempt to solve practical problems in societies at various scales. The body of literature on action research has grown tremendously, especially during the last three decades. Hence, this is not a place to unpack diverse issues on *epistemology* and *methodology* on action research. However, attempts are made to pinpoint salient issues in action research based on the current literature.

Action research owes its origin to the classical social researchers such as John Dewey and Kurt Lewin. The turning point in action research goes back to the mid 1940s where Kurt Lewin made a sterling contribution. Following that period, though its spread was rather slow, the idea of action research reached all parts of the world and touched the lives of societies especially in education, organizational development, politics, health and community development.

Owing to its attention to problem solving, action research did not attract the interest of the academia and conventional scientists who subscribe to positivist methodology until just very recently. Growth of this approach owes to the work of social scientists in anthropology; some sub-fields of sociology, economics, psychology and management (Brydon-Miller, et al., 2003). Even then, scientists from each of these disciplines follow their own paths in actual research processes due to methodological differences. The

major difference is between those who conduct action research from interpretive-critical social science paradigms (collectively, constructivist¹) and those who follow positivist paradigm. The latter one, more often than not, imposes standard experimental procedures with duality in subject-object in the research process (Cassell and Johnson, 2006).

In interpretive-critical paradigm, social researchers conduct research to critique and transform social relations through empowering societies to free themselves from myths, illusions and misunderstandings (Neuman, 1997). This philosophical route is evident from definition of action research within this school.

Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally they flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, cited in Brydon-Miller, et al., 2003).

Action research as the name clearly shows combines both action and research. The research part address data collection and interpretation even though these are all jointly done by all actors involved (Melrose, 2001). Whereas the conventional social scientists including those conducting applied research give lip-service to action part, for action researchers the main goal is to understand the problem in order to design a better solution through new knowledge. Unlike the main stream science researchers, research process in action research is markedly different from the former by directly involving people who are concerned with the problem in the research process. For instance, action research in question may be initiated at school or community level. In this case, key stakeholders in these social systems are identified and given roles to define their problem further and seek solution and try out the new solution while jointly monitoring its turn out in relation to the old problem. In this process, new set of problems could also emerge that makes the action research a spiral rather than a linear process. In this case, unlike the time bounds of the conventional researches, action research project may require several years to complete series of learning cycles that involve different steps (Melrose, 2001). These are; problem identification, diagnosis, planning intervention, and evaluation of outcomes to estimate what has been achieved and to plan subsequent interventions (Bargal, 2008).

Notwithstanding the roles of insiders' community in the action research process, some action research projects assign experienced researchers to assist with an initial research plan, data gathering and related field activities (Melrose, 2001) that diminishes as more confidence and experiences are gained by insiders.

Action research is based on problem-solving premises that involve steps mentioned above. This process is dynamic and changing. Periodic reflections of action research participants' provide data for research and also actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993 cited in Bargal, 2008) to solve the conceived problem. These functions are ensured through continuous cooperation between the stakeholders who have stake in the subject of action research and the main stream researchers who have interest in knowledge

¹ Critical-constructivist action research may include experimental design and quantitative approach whenever deemed necessary – to understand the social world better.

generation besides societal developments. Partnership between different stakeholders in action research recognizes equal contribution of all actors in the research decision. This emanates from the understanding of the roles and insights of insiders regarding the problem under consideration among action researchers from out-side organizations. This view is rooted in Lewin's work where he clearly demonstrated that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself (Brydon-Miller, et al., 2003). This principle allows for applying theory generated in the research processes to solve social problems, creating an ideal way in which theory and practices are married.

The function of research, from scientific points of view is addressed through the feedback process in the action research cycle that takes place at every step, which is technically a continuous process. This cycle involves a series of reflection, action and feedback where all actors in the research should take active parts. This phenomenon is well summarized in the work of Melrose (2001) who writes that "Action research is critical, evaluative, systematic, strategic, participatory, emancipatory, and having theory inform practice and practice inform theory." He also adds that the researcher researches with, not on other people and does not treat the group merely as objects or sources of data.

Action research achieves its objectives because of its philosophical perspective. It recognizes differences in values and objectives among stakeholders. Its recognition of these differences in the society makes it very instrumental in changing societies.

Even though action research is widely claimed now-a-days by different practitioners, its features and application is still controversial. Some of the key issues are related to scientific rigour and relationship between the subject (the knower) and the object (what is known) in science. Regarding rigour, action researchers strongly defend that action research generates valid knowledge that is tested in practice whereby multiple sources of evidences are used (Melrose, 2001; Brydon-Miller, et al., 2003; Deluca, et al., 2008). In deed, whether the actions that arise from the process solve problems and increase the participants' control over their situation is critical criteria of rigour in action research (Greenwood and Levin (1998) cited in Melrose, 2001).

The issue of relationship between researchers and participant community or actors goes back to classical anthropological works that contributed to techniques and practices of action research (Eikeland, 2008). In view of far reaching implications of relational issues in action research it is separately treated below with mode of inquiry.

Modes of Inquiry and Relationships in Action Research

The issue of field roles by researchers has been a point of contention in field oriented social sciences, notably in Anthropology. Generally, researchers role are expected to span over a continuum by the degree of detachment or involvement. More specifically, we have roles of a detached outsider at one extreme and at the other extreme are roles of an

intimately involved insider. Moreover, these roles move from outsiders to insiders over time and have their own advantages and disadvantages² (Neuman, 1997).

In the mainstream action research relational issues are translated in mode of inquiry. Mode of inquiry is one of key issues to maintain validity of knowledge generation and relevance of action therein.

As measurement or instrumentation is crucial in the conventional research, integrity and credibility of action researcher as “instrument” in the inquiry process is very important. In this regard Bradbury and Reason (2003) write “Action researchers are invited, if not sooner then later, to understand that they are the instrument of their own research. As such we must individually bear responsibility for the quality of attention, consciousness, and interpersonal interaction that we generate around us.”

Inquiry process in action research was conceived as a three-person framework (Reason and Torbert (2001), cited in Burgess, 2005). These are first-person, second-person and third person action research. However, this distinction is for ease of presentation rather conceptual, as all three action research pathways are integrated.

First person research refers to a process whereby a researcher explicitly developing inquiry practice to examine personal experiences more like self-reflection in every day life, where feedback is also used to complement personal reflection. Second-person research is a form of inquiry which creates a community of learning through interpersonal dialogue and other forms of conversation with others. In this case, the researcher(s) need to have ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issue of mutual concern and engage with others productively. Third-person research can be understood as participation in a larger community where personal interaction may not be possible, and includes writing and other process of documenting inquiry. In this case, the inquiry process builds upon the practice of first and second person to create a wider community of inquiry involving a whole organization or community whereby the issue in the action research can be brought to wider audience (Bradbury and Reason, 2003; White, 2004).

In the proceeding sections key issues in action research are presented. In the following section we turn to a discussion on inquiry pathway of action research in Fodder Innovation Project.

² For instance on the outsiders end, though the researcher feels marginalized, gives more room for self-identity, whereas roles at the insiders end may lead to lack of distance on what the researcher observes, even though it facilitates empathy and sharing member’s experiences.

Application of Action Research in Fodder Innovation Research Project

Fodder Innovation Project, Phase II is developed based on salient lessons from Phase I and experiences elsewhere (Hall et al., 2007). The key lesson is that technology alone is limited with respect to changing livelihood of livestock dependent rural people; rather it requires institutional changes to embed and utilize knowledge and information in the system.

Having departed from the above concrete experiences, the project team designed phase II of the project as an action research project that applies innovation system perspective (Ibid). This point of departure entails thinking of the project context as multi-actor and multi-location practice in order to draw generic lesson from the diversities encountered in the process besides strengthening innovation capacity (see below) at the system where action are initiated (see Hall, Nov 2008 update).

Then, how is action research practiced in the project? Action research in the project began with the initiative of the research team based on their lessons from phase I and a conviction to promote innovation capacity within systems identified for action. Note that this is one modality in which action research is initiated (Bradbury and Reason, 2003). It can also be initiated by the request of the hosting community, or it can evolve from the conventional projects.

As part of lessons learned, the project drafted its conceptual framework and enriched it in the process, which is further expected to be improved based on on-going lessons through out the life the project, at least. Concurrently, the team carried out 'landscaping' exercise to identify potential partners in the envisaged project sites. Following that selected organizations were invited by the project for further awareness creation about the project philosophy which is markedly different not only from Phase I of the same project, but also from the rest of conventional rural development projects, in that it focuses on capacity to innovate rather than hardware components and technologies alone. This exercise which was called as a 'partners leveling' exercise, allowed for self-selection and/or de-selection by the project team.

A follow up visit and workshops at the selected sites were conducted that was followed by a formal project partnership contract. During this interaction with the partners, the project team also undertook rapid diagnosis to understand the identified organizations better where further understanding was created on the institutional history of key partner organizations, agro-ecological factors and innovation system concept. This aspect of the project activity took nearly about a year. As the project requires informed partnership that should move according to the pace and motivation of identified partners was a crucial issue that is less understood, when one goes by a name of a research project as in the usual case. It should be recalled that the project activities are unconventional and hints to networking and managing networks rather than technology that influences the pace of reaction of potential partners.

Looking at the progress of the partnership, the project team commissioned an inception workshop to create awareness on methodology and develop a preliminary action plan based on the rapid diagnosis. At this stage there were eight lead organizations, four each

in India and Nigeria, which are now reduced to five. These organizations are called Key Partner Organizations (KPOs).

After the inception workshop, field activities in both India and Nigeria began. Some of the key activities carried out in the first half of 2008 were in depth institutional diagnosis (see Hall, Nov. 2008 update) and socio-economic bench-marking (see update by Prasad, Jan. 2009).

Operationally, KPOs designate one or two persons who follow up the learning processes in each site. For project management purpose, these personnel are called “Innovation Coordinators”. The other operational body is the Research Team that is represented by the Implementing Agency (ILRI), Technical Backstopping body (UNU-MERIT-CRISP) and Collaborative organizations (ICRISAT, IITA).

The major role of KPOs is to lead the local “innovation clouds” (innovation platform) that are expected to facilitate for strengthening innovation capacity within the contexts of each project site in both India and Nigeria (see Hall, Nov. 2008 update). As insiders, KPOs through their Innovation Coordinators work with range of governmental, non-governmental, cooperative, private companies and local communities that constitute the innovation clouds. They are looking for new ways of actor configuration and resource mobilization, including knowledge and information in the innovation process that are related to fodder within the broader livestock production system.

The Research Team meets frequently to discuss about progress of the action research based on the feedback from the PDFs and other Project Team members who visit the project sites from time to time. In this process, KPOs/Innovation Coordinators play a lead role in the interaction with other partners. The role of the Research Team is to assist the KPOs and their partners to learn better about the way to strengthen innovation capacity in relation to their specific action or learning experiment. More specifically, the Project Team is researching on the learning process of the KPOs about managing networking for innovation.

From the forgoing discussion, the action research design in FIP II can be characterized as a combination of first, second and third person action research (Reason and Torbert (2001), cited in Burgess, 2005), which is normally considered as a strength of action research. The first-person action research such as the one I am trying to do for this monthly update is done by everyone in the project at various levels, depending on the degree of exposures one has to the project activities and interactions. Among these, Innovation Coordinators are at an ideal position for extensive first-person action research where they combine it with the second-person action research from their face-to-face interaction with other project partners and research team members. The third person action research is carried out at the level of project team where the project is interacting with wider audience, including, donors, collaborators, partners’ organizations, other projects and the scientific communities. These kinds of interactions are underway, through project workshops, electronic media, and periodic reports.

The project has developed monitoring and learning system that suits action research. KPOs are conducting periodic consultation meeting with participants in the innovation

platforms in order to assess progresses made in the direction of action agenda identified at each site. Besides physical activities that are to the issue of the action research – fodder – the key point of learning is on capturing lessons on networking behaviour among partners that is essential for the strength of innovation capacity. Data/information from these reflection meetings are captured through narrative records and scoreboard, as deemed applicable. While Innovation Coordinators facilitate learning at platform level through different techniques including scoreboard, they are also documenting their first-person action research and share with the project team members. Mutual discussion between Innovation Coordinator and the PDF would facilitate a third-person action research that is carried at the project level.

In view of the nature of action research agenda that focuses on systems' innovation capacity rather than a transfer of technology, the project team is keenly observing and reflecting on the processes of action research, specially the outcome stories and processes, which would be shared in the future issues. To that extent, modalities of relationship between the project partners, especially the research team, the KPOs and other partners that is characterized as a part of the three-person framework need to be closely observed as to how it contributes to the learning outcomes and action agenda for the KPOs.

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