

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH in health systems

## A METHODS READER

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**Participatory action research seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. It transforms the role of those who usually 'participate' as the subjects of research. Instead, those directly affected by problems become active researchers and agents of change who collectively act, produce change and create new knowledge.**

In the 21st century there is a growing demand to channel collective energy towards justice and equity in health, and to better understand the social processes that influence health and health systems. Communities, frontline health workers and other grass-roots actors play a key role in responding to this demand, in raising critical questions, building new knowledge and provoking and carrying out action to transform health systems and improve health. There is a widening array of methods, tools and capacities – old and new – to increase social participation and power in generating new knowledge through participatory research. At the same time, we need to be clear about exactly what participatory research is and what it can offer. This reader promotes understanding of the term 'participatory action research' (PAR) and provides information on its paradigms, methods, application and use, particularly in health policy and systems.

The reader was produced through the Regional Network for Equity in Health in East and Southern Africa (EQUINET), with Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (AHPSR) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada and was launched at the Third Global Symposium on Health Systems Research in South Africa in September 2014. The result of team work, the reader draws on experience and published work from all regions globally and explains:

- **key features** of participatory action research and the history and knowledge paradigms that inform it;
- **processes** and **methods** used in participatory action research, including innovations and developments in the field and the ethical and methods issues in implementing it; and
- **communication, reporting, institutionalization** and **use** of participatory action research in health systems.



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*The Reader is a very well written and useful publication. We share the spirit of the Reader and the attempt to democratize research and make it more inclusive, by making it participatory, in local people's control, and ensuring, in particular, that the voices of the poorest people and communities are included.*

Mirai Chatterjee  
Director, Self-Employed Women's  
Association Social Security, India



Regional Network on Equity  
in Health in East and  
Southern Africa



Training and  
Research  
Support Centre



Alliance for  
Health Policy and  
Systems Research



World Health  
Organization



IDRC | CRDI  
Canada

## The structure of the reader

The reader is organized in five parts.

### Part one: Concepts

This part gives an overview of participatory action research and its use in health systems and in health policy and systems research, summarizing the key features and the historical roots and drivers. We describe the different participatory action research paradigms used to generate knowledge and explore the significance of a paradigm that locates the nature and production of knowledge as an outcome of social relations. We discuss the role of power and participation in health systems as a context for participatory action research, relating it to other forms of health policy and systems research.

### Part two: Methods

This part focuses on implementing participatory action research in health systems, introducing the processes and methods used, including those to overcome the subject–object distinction. We suggest methods and tools for gathering evidence, noting the importance of context. We explore some specific aspects of implementing participatory action research, including the use of new information technologies, the methods for reviewing, reflecting on and evaluating action and for meta-analysis across individual sites. Finally we outline experiences on institutionalizing participatory action research in health systems.

### Part three: Issues & challenges

This part raises various issues that arise in applying these methods in participatory action research, including selection bias, classification and comparability of groups, validity of evidence, causality, and reproduction and generalization of results. We examine ethical issues and logistic challenges, as well as the opportunities this approach offers in health policy and systems research.

### Part four: Evidence & action

This part discusses options for and experiences in communicating and using evidence from participatory action research, offering guidance on reporting. We discuss how to use the knowledge generated in participatory action research in health systems and policy. Finally we explore the role of learning networks and communities of practice in supporting and developing participatory action research methods and practice.

### Part five: Empirical papers

This part reproduces twenty-one published empirical papers that are referred to in different parts of the reader and that provide examples of different features and aspects of participatory action research. The electronic version includes links to these papers on the internet, rather than the papers themselves.

*It is a propitious time  
for participatory work  
to prick the anaesthesia  
that is settling into our  
collective bodies. PAR  
projects gather up social  
critique and outrage,  
ambivalence and desire,  
as forms of knowledge.  
Inquiry is valued as  
oxygen for democratic  
sustenance ...*

Michelle Fine  
City University of New York



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