

Planning an Action Research Project¹

Use this handout help you plan an action research project that is relevant and needed in light of:

- the needs and priorities of the community you are serving
- the mandate and priorities of your organization
- your personal perspectives and values

Note: To make this action research project a *participatory* action research project, the different parties (the researchers, the critical reference group, other stakeholders, and the researched) need to be involved at all steps of the process. This means including their participation as much as possible even in the earliest stages of planning.

Step 1: Identify your general idea.

Ask questions such as:

- What is happening now?
- In what sense is this problematic?
- What can I do about it?

General starting points will look like:

- We would like to improve the ...
- Some people are unhappy about ...
- What can we do to change the situation of ...?
- We are perplexed by ...
- ... is a source of irritation. What can we do about it?
- We have an idea we would like to try out in my work ...
- How can the experience of ... be applied to ...?
- Just what do we do with respect to ...?

Avoid issues which you can do nothing about. Questions like the relationship between socio-economic status and achievement may be interesting but they have tenuous links with action. Stick with issues in which you do something which has potential for improvement. Remember that strategic action is your way to improve your practice/programme and your understanding of apparent and real constraints on change.

Formulate 3-4 ideas including the following two aspects for each:

- a recognition of what is presently happening as a basis for thinking about issues
- an emphasis on trying something out, on doing: on developing strategic action as a variation of existing practice

Link the idea, present practice, and strategic action which will lead to improvement.

Keep the issue small; if your first step is successful, you can always expand outward.

Taking the following criteria, choose one idea on which to focus.

- how important the issue is to us
- how important the issue is to the community with which we are working
- what opportunities there are to explore the area
- who might be interested in helping
- the constraints (practical and political) of our situation
- the manageability of the task

¹ Adapted from Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Retallick, J. (2004). *The Action Research Planner*, Second Edition (Revised). Karachi, Pakistan: Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development.

Step 2: Define the field of action.

Carefully think about and answer the following questions:

- What is happening already?
- What is the reason for what is happening already?
- What are the opportunities to implement action which reflects the general idea?
- Exactly what are we trying to change?
- Can we think of a few changes in strategy that might be worth trying out?
- What are the possibilities?
- What are the constraints of content, time, resources, manpower?
- What is realistic given the importance of the issue?
- Which constraints are 'absolute' and which might be negotiable?

Think about the social context in which you are working, and consider some of the anticipated effects of your intended action:

- Who is affected?
- Who else is involved?
- With whom must we negotiate?
- What are the opportunities, possibilities and constraints?
- How are we going to protect the rights of those involved or affected in terms of privacy, confidentiality and discretion?

Write out the following:

- What is being done now
- What we want to change
- The rationale for what we presently do, and the rationale for the particular change we are planning
- What we want to leave unchanged (and is close enough to our field of action to warrant thought)
- What form our most likely strategic action will take (list 2-3 possibilities).
- Things which are still subject to resource availability and negotiation.

Step 3: Define and plan the first action step.

It is now time to select and construct in detail the plan of your first strategic action – the first action step. Think strategically – choose action which will lead not only to improvement but which will help you to know what to do next.

Describe the action, including the following:

- An exact description of what we are going to change/do.
- The rationale for the strategic action we are planning.
 - How/why does it improve our practice/programme and the situation?
 - How/why does it lead to greater understanding of our practice/programme and the situation?
- The intended effects of our strategic action. Include any positive or negative side effects which we could anticipate, and discuss how we will deal with the negative effects.
- The people who are involved. How will they be involved generally and in the long-term? What is their specific engagement in the first action step?
- The people who are affected. How might people (staff, children, parents, other community members) react? How will we accommodate these reactions?
- Resource requirements. Describe materials, space, room changes, equipment and other things we need for this action step. Think about future resource requirements as well.
- Likely constraints and problems. List these and think about how we will handle them. We need to be prepared to grapple with the unanticipated and unintended.

- Confidentiality. How will we maintain confidentiality, to ensure that the information we gather is not misused?
- How will the action be monitored? (see below)
- What is the timetable for the action? (see below)

Monitoring the action:

The purpose of observing or monitoring is to provide you with information and impressions necessary for reflection, to 'know what happened'. This then provides the basis for the development of the general plan of action and the improvement of strategic action in subsequent cycles. You will want to monitor:

- The strategic action as a process: Did we do what we planned to do? If not, what form did the action take?
- The consequences of our strategic action: What were the intended and anticipated effects, and what were the unintended and unanticipated effects?
- The circumstances of our strategic action: What were the circumstances in which we acted? How have the circumstances, or our understanding of them, changed?

Your observation 'techniques' thus must be able to observe both anticipated / intended and unanticipated / unintended effects. Thus, while you may have particular techniques of observing/monitoring (e.g., an observation guide), you should always keep a reflective journal to record events and impressions as they occur, and to help you sustain a sense of progress. Your observation methodology should also collect data from multiple perspectives, since various people will be impacted by and will perceive the action (and the circumstances and consequences) differently. Here are some possible monitoring techniques:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| - Anecdotal records | - Diaries or journals | - Questionnaires |
| - Field notes | - Logs | - Interviews |
| - Portfolios | - Item sampling cards | - Sociometric methods |
| - Document analysis | - Photographs and slides | - Samples of work |
| - Tape-recording | - Video-recording | - Performance tests |
| - Ecological behavioural description | - Interaction schedules and checklists | |

Timetable for the action:

Detail each activity to be carried out as follows. Flexibility is essential in any social research, but having a timetable serves as a helpful guide.

Stage	Beginning / closing date	Monitoring	Duration	Comments
Finalizing action research plan				
First action step				
Reflection				
Planning for second action step				
Second action step				

Step 4: Write out your Action Research Plan.

Most of this has already been thought out in the previous steps. Now you simply write out your action research plan:

1. Background
 - a. General idea
 - b. Field of action
2. First Action Step
3. Monitoring
4. Timetable

Share this with your colleagues/supervisors, as well as the people impacted and involved in this action. Gather and incorporate critical feedback.

Step 5: Implement and observe the first action step.

We now carry out our first action step, monitoring as we go.

Note that observation is not a passive phase, it involves making meaning out of what is happening, and is the basis for reflection and re-planning.

- Always maintain a project journal to record our thoughts, feelings and impressions as we go. Be a subjective spectator.
- Do not change our plan or strategic action too soon.
- Keep thinking back to the rationale for our practice and for the particular strategic action step we have taken. Constantly re-examine your assumptions.

Step 6: Reflect and report on the first action step.

This is the process of sorting out what your data and impressions mean. Your report should include an account of:

- How our general idea has evolved and changed from its inception to the present, including the rationale for our practice;
- How our field of action came to be defined in our original understanding, and how it might be redefined now for future action;
- The circumstances in which action was taken;
- What our strategic action was and whether we sustained it or altered it (intentionally or unintentionally) during implementation through various activities;
- How our monitoring worked and whether there were any hitches, or whether we changed our techniques with experience in the field;
- The consequences of our action: intended, unintended; anticipated, unanticipated;
- The perspectives of others on the circumstances, action and its consequences;
- Changes in role of those involved
- Effects of people, further negotiations conducted;
- Problems encountered, how they were solved;
- The success of our attempts to maintain confidentiality, privacy and discretion
- How we found improvement in our practice/programme and in our understanding of it
- What we think now about the situation
- Some tentative ideas indicating our general position as we prepare to enter the next cycle

Step 7: Develop and implement a revised plan...

Our cycle has by now begun to be an action research spiral. We now return to the 'first' step and use the same series of activities to evaluate the new current situation and to develop a revised plan of action.