

Participatory Action Research (PAR): An Alternative Approach to Development Planning

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Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has emerged as a transformative methodology in development planning, aiming to empower marginalized communities through collaborative knowledge creation, capacity-building, and participatory decision-making. Rooted in critical pedagogy and social justice frameworks, PAR challenges traditional top-down approaches by fostering inclusivity, mutual learning, and context-specific solutions, prioritizing community agency and self-determination. This article explores the theoretical foundations, historical evolution, and practical applications of PAR, emphasizing its potential to address socio-economic inequalities, enhance participatory governance, and contribute to sustainable development. However, implementing PAR faces challenges such as ethical dilemmas, power imbalances, and resource limitations, necessitating strategic approaches for effective application. The article concludes that PAR offers a viable alternative to conventional development methodologies, providing a framework for more inclusive, community-driven, and sustainable policy outcomes.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Development Planning, Community Empowerment, Social Justice, Knowledge Co-creation

Introduction

In contemporary development discourse, the concepts of participation, sustainability, and empowerment have gained significant prominence (Michener, 1998). Initially applied in third-world contexts to empower oppressed communities, PAR has since found relevance in developed countries as well (Piercy et al., 2011; Reason, 1994). Defined as a collaborative process of research, education, and action, PAR explicitly aims at social transformation (Kindon et al., 2007). Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it advocates for the active involvement of community members in the research process, enabling them to become research partners rather than mere subjects (Piercy et al., 2011).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative methodology integrating research, education, and action with an explicit aim of fostering social transformation (Kindon et al., 2007; Hall, 1981). Originating from Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, PAR has evolved significantly, enriched by the contributions of numerous scholars (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Fundamentally, PAR seeks to enable marginalized and oppressed communities to transform their socio-economic environment through active participation in research and action. Researchers, in this context, assume a facilitative role, acting as catalysts and supporters rather than authoritative figures (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). By empowering community members to become co-researchers, PAR promotes mutual learning and shared ownership of the research process (Piercy et al., 2011).

Purpose of the article

The primary purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework for employing PAR as an alternative to traditional development planning. By critically examining PAR's theoretical underpinnings and practical applications, the article seeks to demonstrate how it can lead to more inclusive, sustainable, and context-specific development outcomes. This article aims to bridge the gap between academic research and practical implementation, providing a robust foundation for future empirical research and policy formulation.

Justification

Rethinking conventional development paradigms is imperative because traditional approaches often exclude marginalized voices and fail to address context-specific needs (Rahman, 1993). PAR offers a novel contribution by fostering empowerment, inclusivity, and participatory decision-making. Unlike traditional methodologies, which prioritize external expertise and top-down interventions, PAR emphasizes collaboration and local ownership of development processes (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). This approach ensures that solutions are culturally relevant and sustainable, addressing the real concerns of communities. Furthermore, as development challenges grow increasingly complex, innovative frameworks like PAR are crucial for creating equitable and effective solutions.

Theoretical Overview and Literature Synthesis

Defining PAR

When defining Participatory Action Research (PAR), it becomes evident that diverse theoretical foundations underpin this methodology. According to McIntyre (2008), PAR emphasizes lived experiences, individual and social change, and the construction of knowledge through action. This approach bridges the gap between knowledge creation and practical application, legitimizing action as a mode of inquiry (McIntyre, 2008, p. xii).

Brydon-Miller (1997) identifies three fundamental criteria characterizing PAR in his article “Participatory Action Research: Psychology and Social Change”:

- 1) Involvement of marginalized groups: PAR primarily engages individuals and communities who are traditionally oppressed, marginalized, or powerless.
- 2) Focus on community-defined topics: PAR addresses specific issues identified by the concerned community to drive positive social transformation.
- 3) Transformation through education and knowledge sharing: PAR enhances participants’ education and skills, fostering collective knowledge creation and contributing to social change (Brydon-Miller, 1997, p. 661).

Additionally, Stringer (2007) underscores the importance of flexibility in PAR, noting that it adapts to specific cultural and social contexts. Banks and Armstrong (2023) emphasize its iterative nature, which fosters continuous dialogue and mutual understanding between researchers and participants. Expanding on this, Zuber-Skerritt (2015) introduces Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), a methodology integrating lifelong learning principles with PAR to broaden its applicability beyond development studies to fields such as education and community health. This research paradigm critiques traditional top-down methodologies, offering a framework for fostering empowerment, social justice, and inclusivity in various socio-political contexts.

This research paradigm emphasizes the active participation of marginalized communities in knowledge generation and decision-making processes, positioning them as co-researchers rather than passive subjects. It critiques traditional top-down methodologies and offers a framework for fostering empowerment and inclusivity in diverse socio-political contexts.

Historical Evolution of PAR

Though there are several interpretations of PAR's history and origin (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009), this paper discusses the historical revolution, which started around the 1960s and progressed by passing important milestones in the 1970s, 1977s, 1980s, and so on.

In the early 1960s, after the Cuban revolution, the liberation movements in Latin America work theories on the mechanism of cultural and economic dependency, advancing towards the participatory research agenda (Hall, 1992) in Brazil. Then, the early 1970s was highlighted as the proliferation of approaches of participatory and participatory action research in India, Africa and Latin America (Kindon et al., 2007). This represented a new epistemology of practice, which reflected the movements in India with Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi's method, called the practice of "soul power", is based on the transformation of local people's knowledge into voicing their concerns and resisting British rule of power (Sivananda, 2007; cited in Kindon et al., 2007).

Marja-Liisa Swantz in Tanzania introduced the term "participatory research" to describe her work, which was conducted in integrating local village members and their knowledge to address locally controlled development

issues such as youth and employment in the coastal region and socio-economic causes of malnutrition in Kilimanjaro (Kindon et al., 2007; Hall, 1992). In 1977, Participatory Research Network was created through the International Council of Adult Education, and Participatory Research became a prominent methodological concept (Sillitoe et al., 2002). It brought together not only social scientists but community organizers, literacy teachers, administrators, urban activists and factory workers (Sillitoe et al., 2002). When highlighting the important milestones of the evolution of PAR, another persuading scholar is Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who wrote his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1910/1993), which introduced the principles of PAR and the notion of “conscientization.” This contribution of Freire lighted a new concept in the social science research area, and most of the researchers were motivated by his work (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Johnson & Martinez Guzman, 2013).

Another important milestone is the first wave of PAR, which took place in Colombia with Orlando Fals-Borda and colleagues and developing alternative institutions and procedures for research which could foster social change (Kindon et al., 2007). Following the first wave of PAR in the 1980s, the second wave of PAR occurred in the context of community development and international development. In this era, alternative approaches were introduced to traditional, top-down, rigid, cumbersome development surveys (Kindon et al., 2007). Further, by the 1990s, PAR was highly recognized and blended with strands of Action Research and critical social sciences (Kindon et al., 2007; Whyte, 1991).

History reveals that PAR has emerged as an alternative approach to cumbersome development practices, pursuing practical issues of concern to people (Kindon et al., 2007).

Table 1*Key Milestones in the Evolution of PAR*

Time Period	Milestone/Development
1960s	The origins of PAR can be traced to liberation movements in Latin America, particularly following the Cuban revolution (Hall, 1992).
Early 1970s	The proliferation of participatory approaches in India, Africa, and Latin America was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's methodologies and local empowerment movements (Kindon et al., 2007).
1977	Establishment of the Participatory Research Network by the International Council of Adult Education.
1980s	The first wave of PAR in Colombia, led by Orlando Fals-Borda, focused on developing alternative institutions and fostering social change.
1990s	The blending of PAR with critical social sciences and action research, highlighting its adaptability to diverse socio-political contexts (Kindon et al., 2007).

Developing the Argument: Critiques, Frameworks, New***Perspectives Epistemological and Ontological Foundations of PAR***

Participatory Action Research (PAR) challenges traditional positivist paradigms by advocating for the co-creation of knowledge through collaboration with marginalized communities. Unlike conventional research, which often centralizes knowledge within academic institutions and assumes objective realities measurable by professionals, PAR emphasizes that knowledge is socially constructed, situated, and dynamic (Kindon et al., 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This counter-hegemonic stance promotes inclusivity and democratizes knowledge production.

PAR's ontology recognizes human beings as dynamic agents with the capacity for reflexivity and self-change. Its epistemology underscores that knowledge is validated through lived experiences and contextual relevance. Kindon et al. (2007) argue that adopting a participatory worldview requires researchers to be explicit about their perspectives and adopt a reflexive approach throughout the research process. Reason and Bradbury (2006) further emphasize that

inquiry in PAR serves a democratic and practical ethos, fostering collaboration and mutual learning.

Critique of Conventional Research Paradigms

Traditional positivist approaches prioritize quantitative data, objectivity, and researcher-centric methodologies. This often leads to power imbalances, where participants are treated merely as data sources rather than active contributors. Glassman and Erdem (2014) critique these methodologies, likening them to exploitative economic models where participants provide raw data in exchange for little to no benefit. Brydon-Miller (1997) highlights the ideological and evaluative biases implicit in such approaches, emphasizing that all scientific knowledge about social realities inherently reflects certain political and normative convictions.

On the contrary, conventional positivists suggest that validity and reality can only be established through quantitative means. Glassman and Erdem (2014), referring to Hall (1975), further argue that oppressive relationships can exist between participants and traditional academic researchers, where researchers assume ownership of data and participants are exploited. According to Brydon-Miller (1997), PAR addresses these power imbalances by engaging researchers and communities as equal partners in the research process.

Principles of Knowledge Generation in PAR

PAR posits that knowledge generation should be democratic and participatory. Communities are actively involved in identifying issues, generating solutions, and implementing actions. This approach not only addresses immediate community needs but also fosters long-term empowerment and capacity-building (Johnson & Martinez Guzman, 2013; Rahman, 1993). Unlike traditional methodologies that often exclude marginalized voices, PAR emphasizes inclusivity and social justice. The engagement of local communities ensures that knowledge is relevant to the specific socio-cultural context and is actionable in real-world scenarios.

Considering this, PAR provides a transformative framework for addressing the hierarchical nature of traditional development paradigms. Rahman (1993) underscores that in conventional approaches, ordinary people have had no voice in their own development, being passive victims of hegemonic practices imposed by dominant groups. PAR, by contrast, generates knowledge that is

not value-free but evolves from the lived experiences and priorities of marginalized communities.

Addressing Power Dynamics

Power dynamics are central to PAR's critique of traditional research. By positioning both researchers and participants as co-creators of knowledge, PAR seeks to dismantle hierarchical relationships inherent in conventional methodologies. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) highlight the ethical imperative of mutual respect and equitable collaboration, which is fundamental to the success of PAR. This approach ensures that participants are not passive subjects but active agents in the research process.

Kindon et al. (2007), referring to Allen (2003), further emphasize that PAR enables negotiation for common goals among participants from different positions, fostering persuasion through argument in an atmosphere of equality. This shared authority among participants is essential for dissolving power inequities historically perpetuating underdevelopment and social exclusion.

Practical Application and Flexibility of PAR

PAR's methodological flexibility allows it to bridge the gap between theoretical inquiry and practical application. By addressing community-defined needs and translating them into actionable strategies, PAR has demonstrated success in fostering empowerment, enhancing self-esteem, building solidarity, and promoting sustainable development (Piercy et al., 2011). Its adaptability has led to widespread adoption in diverse socio-political contexts since the 1970s, making it a viable alternative to rigid, top-down development models.

Moreover, unlike traditional research, which often prioritizes quick results, PAR acknowledges the complexity of social change processes, requiring sustained engagement and iterative cycles of action and reflection. Despite being resource- and time-intensive, the long-term impact of PAR on community well-being justifies its continued use as a transformative development approach.

A Viable Alternative to Traditional Research

PAR offers a transformative alternative to conventional research paradigms. By critiquing the limitations of traditional positivist methodologies and

emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and empowerment, PAR provides a robust framework for sustainable and community-driven development. The dynamic interplay between knowledge generation and community action underscores its potential to foster meaningful social change and contribute to a more equitable and just society.

Future research should continue to explore and refine PAR methodologies, ensuring their adaptability and relevance across diverse contexts. Furthermore, policymakers and development practitioners are encouraged to adopt PAR principles to create more inclusive and participatory development processes that genuinely address the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities.

Self and Community Empowerment

According to Tandon (1982), research aims to solve social problems by unlocking human creativity and mobilizing available resources. In community development, reality should be constructed by the local community, which is directly affected, rather than imposed by hierarchical “top-down” professional investigators using the positivist approach (Rahman, 1993). While this perspective acknowledges the role of professionals in development, it stresses the importance of equally empowering both researchers and the community. In light of this, Participatory Action Research (PAR) strongly advocates for self and community empowerment by promoting the shared agency of academic researchers and local communities. Furthermore, PAR facilitates the inclusion of marginalized voices in the development agenda.

Kindon (2007), referencing Allen (2003), identified three key benefits of PAR: negotiation to achieve common goals among diverse participants, persuasion through reasoned dialogue in a setting of equality, and shared authority in decision-making. PAR prioritizes the equitable distribution of power rather than domination, aiming to dissolve entrenched power inequities within society (Kindon et al., 2007). These inequities have created a world where some nations thrive while others remain underdeveloped or marginalized, thereby widening the gap between those who “have” and those who “don’t have.” Historically, developed nations or dominant parties have enjoyed more power and exerted authority over less developed nations by utilizing existing structures, thus assuming the role of responsible authority at local, national, and global levels. Rahman (1993) contends that under such authority,

intellectuals and professionals are responsible for assessing reality and producing knowledge that guides policy and action.

In contrast to traditional top-down development practices, PAR presents a novel methodology that reshapes the roles of academic researchers, participants, and community members (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). It emphasizes the lived experiences and realities of community members, prioritizing collaborative inquiry over abstract, hypothesis-driven research. Glassman and Erdem (2014) assert that the goal of PAR is not to test hypotheses with pre-established questions but to enhance human conditions by addressing real-world issues through the active participation of the community. This organic approach fosters the development of practical solutions that belong to the people and the society they inhabit.

The methodology of PAR emphasizes action-oriented research that engages directly with the community. Instead of viewing participants as mere study subjects, PAR recognizes them as co-researchers who contribute to the research process. This collaborative approach ensures that knowledge generation is not only more inclusive but also more relevant to the community's needs. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the participatory nature of PAR fosters a deeper understanding of social realities and drives self and community empowerment.

By challenging the traditional hierarchical structures of knowledge production, PAR promotes a model of shared learning and mutual respect. It seeks to democratize the research process, ensuring that all participants have an equal voice in identifying problems, designing research methods, and implementing solutions. In doing so, PAR helps to address systemic power imbalances and contributes to the creation of more just and equitable societies.

To summarize, PAR offers a transformative approach to research and community development by emphasizing empowerment, collaboration, and practical action. It transcends traditional research paradigms by empowering communities to construct their own realities, fostering ownership and agency. As a participatory and action-driven methodology, PAR holds significant potential for addressing complex social problems in a manner that is both inclusive and sustainable.

Challenges in Implementing PAR

Over the past several decades, the interest and importance of PAR has spread around the world. As with any other discourse in development, PAR is also being highly criticized due to issues of empowerment, ethical concerns, data rigour and validity, and the time and cost involved. Further, Gregory (2000) and Lennie (2005) highlighted considerable differences in power and knowledge among PAR participants as a major issue.

Ethical Concerns in PAR

Practicing in PAR may raise critical issues in research ethics (Kindon et al., 2007), during the collaborative process of changes. Those issues which are due to the particularities of PAR, issues of authority or other issues like relationship building and deciding who is taking part are not identified as unique (McIntyre, 2008). According to Kindon (2007), though institutional guidelines exist for handling ethical issues, they do not soundly address them. However, this essay argues that it is necessary to practice ethics in care without diluting the positive potential effects of PAR in development in the vehicle of ethical issues.

It is important to identify alternative approaches towards participatory ethics without displacing the established importance of beneficence, respect for persons and justice (Kindon et al., 2007). However, there is no unique one which can alleviate the many more ethical issues and risks integrated throughout PAR (McIntyre, 2008). Under such critical perspectives, both researchers and participants should be committed to working together to provide equity, safety, and parity in resources within the PAR process (Kindon et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2008). This essay further highlighted the importance of properly maintaining an ethical and transparent status that,

‘Endangers trust and reciprocity with the people who invite us to their lives’ (McIntyre, 2008, p. 13).

Negative power effects on participation

Though there are highly positive arguments that PAR can empower, liberate and emancipatory participants, critiques argue about the negative power effect of PAR, causing unintended disempowerment among participants (Lennie, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007).

Data and Rigor

There is a great debate among academics about the reliability and validity of data gathered through a participatory approach (Byrne, 2008). Particularly, schools of thought such as logical positivism, empiricism, and structuralism reject the social value bias from researchers in what they consider to be “scientific” research (Rahman, 1993). They argued about data collected in Participatory Action Research are merely raw numbers or information, which do not make any sense in terms of validity and reality parameters (Brydon-Miller & Tolman, 1997). Also, the epistemological standpoint of PAR argued that no research in the analysis can be value-free. However, Brydon-Miller and Tolman (1997) argued that judging the validity of information is not an easy task and is a challenging process, and it cannot be finalized with only one or two perspectives. When compared to existence evidence of the impacts of development projects, this essay observes that only rigour and validity of the data do less to progress the world. Further, Brydon-Miller and Tolman (1997), referring to Brinberg and McGrath (1985) and Maxwell (1992), have pointed out that not only the validity of the data but also integrity and quality should be assessed in relation to the purpose and context of the research conducted, and it is not something that can be purchased with scientific technique.

Resource and Time Integrity

Compared with traditional approaches, PAR requires more time and resources as it is not just a data collection process in the field. It requires more initial attempts to adapt and develop a particular community with the process. More donors who want instant results from their investment in society have no preferences for practising PAR, even though it really addresses the social need as a permanent remedy.

However, this paper argues that constraints like time and resources should not dilute the potential positive impacts that PAR can generate on society.

A complex and heterogeneous society

Lennie (2006) pointed out that, ‘In addition, due to factors such as differences in power and knowledge among those involved, participatory methods can produce unintended disempowering effects and must therefore be undertaken

with great skill and care’(p:28) referring Gregory (2000); Lennie (2005); McKie (2003).

PAR has a major challenge in addressing social heterogeneity due to gender, age, class, ethnicity, ability, income and cast. In addition to those categories of variation, every person in a society has different ways of thinking, persuasion, and behaviour patterns, and they all have different attitudes. These attitudinal differences among participants may cause considerable differences in findings as the way they grab the context may vary in accordance with their perception towards the matter. Under this situation, PAR practitioners may be misled or in trouble in searching for the “real” reality of local knowledge.

Ontological and epistemological premises of PAR acknowledge diversified heterogenic ideas rather than generalize the “local knowledge” with mean, median, or any statistical magic, as traditional researchers do without accepting or concerning the diversification in society. By contrast, diversification in nature, whether it is gender, class, ethnicity or any other factor, never fails to amaze the PAR practitioner and his findings, which ultimately benefit society.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposed in this article illustrates how PAR operates as a cyclical and iterative process involving key principles, processes, and outcomes. This framework visually represents the interaction between various elements and highlights the unique contributions of PAR to development planning.

Core Principles

- **Participation:** Active involvement of marginalized communities in the entire research and decision-making process.
- **Inclusivity:** Ensuring diverse community representation across gender, class, ethnicity, and other social categories.
- **Empowerment:** Enhancing the capacity of communities to take control of their development agenda.

Key Processes

- Collaborative Inquiry: Researchers and community members work together to identify issues, collect data, and generate solutions.
- Knowledge Co-creation: Knowledge is jointly produced by integrating local insights with academic research.
- Action and Reflection: Solutions are implemented in practice, followed by reflection to assess outcomes and refine strategies.

According to Oliveira (2024), PAR's co-creation process strengthens community ownership and ensures that outcomes are relevant and sustainable. Keahey (2021) highlights how PAR contributes to sustainable development by promoting context-specific solutions and long-term engagement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The conceptual framework presented in this article highlights PAR's cyclical and iterative nature, emphasizing its adaptability and collaborative processes. In this discussion, key elements of the framework are analyzed, underscoring PAR's role as a transformative research methodology.

One of the core strengths of PAR is its ability to foster empowerment by actively involving marginalized communities in decision-making processes. By engaging communities as co-researchers, PAR not only addresses immediate issues but also builds long-term capacity, enhancing self-reliance and resilience (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Johnson & Martinez Guzman, 2013). The collaborative inquiry process ensures that research is relevant, actionable, and rooted in local contexts, which is crucial for sustainable development (Keahey, 2021)

Furthermore, PAR's iterative cycles of action and reflection allow for continuous learning and improvement. Banks and Armstrong (2023) emphasize that this iterative nature fosters deeper understanding and dialogue, bridging the gap between theory and practice. This adaptability enables PAR to address diverse socio-political challenges, making it applicable across various fields, such as education, community health, and environmental management (Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, 2015)

Despite its many strengths, PAR is not without challenges. It requires significant time, resources, and commitment from researchers and community members. Ethical concerns about power dynamics and representation also need careful consideration (Cornwall & Jewkes, 2010). Practitioners must ensure that the research process remains inclusive and equitable, avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism or exploitation.

In light of these discussions, PAR offers a viable alternative to traditional research paradigms by fostering genuine community engagement, co-creating knowledge, and promoting social justice. However, its success largely depends on the commitment to ethical principles, continuous reflection, and the willingness to adapt to specific community contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, PAR offers a transformative alternative to conventional research paradigms. By critiquing the limitations of traditional positivist methodologies and emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and empowerment, PAR provides a robust framework for sustainable and community-driven development. The dynamic interplay between knowledge generation and community action underscores its potential to foster meaningful social change and contribute to a more equitable and just society.

Future research must continue to explore and refine PAR methodologies, ensuring their adaptability and relevance across diverse contexts. Furthermore, policymakers and development practitioners are encouraged to adopt PAR principles to create more inclusive and participatory development processes that genuinely address the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities.

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