FOSTERING PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

How can we make research more inclusive of the voices of people who are affected by the issues we are researching? Although a simple question, this is one that is often not considered or is quickly dismissed. This guideline has therefore been written for anyone conducting, commissioning or managing research who thinks it would benefit from being more participatory but is unsure how to do this. As one of Oxfam's Research Guidelines, it focuses on people working to reduce poverty reduction and inequalities. We recommend reading it together with others in the series, including our guideline on Integrating Gender in Research Planning.

Participatory research typically means research in which the people whose lives are the focus of the research are involved in specific aspects of the research process. Such research is often based on principles of empowerment and accountability. However, even where such principles do not underpin the research process, it can still be relevant and possible **to use** participatory research approaches or methods. We therefore use the phrase **participation in research** to refer to research with varying degrees of participation by people who are the focus of the research. Being clear about what you mean by 'participation in research' –- and being precise about what is involved –- will help align expectations and practice.

WHY PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH MATTERS

'Participation in research' comprises a wide range of approaches and methods. They share the common purpose of involving stakeholders, particularly those affected by the research issue, in specific aspects of the research process.

This differs from other research approaches that emphasize the need for 'objective' or 'professional' researchers to be in control. In practice, objectivity and participation are compatible: it is possible to conduct rigorous and 'objective' participatory research through careful sequencing of the research process and management of researcher bias.

Common reasons for, and benefits from, involving stakeholders and affected people in the research process are:

- **Representational** – to ensure research findings take into account the priorities and experiences of people affected by the research issue, for example by giving them a say in the research process.

- **Instrumental** – to (a) increase research use and impact by involving people affected by the issue and other relevant stakeholders in the research process, or (b) improve the accuracy and relevance of research findings, for example by testing findings with direct understanding of the research issue, or by triangulating with other stakeholders.

www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice

OXFAM

RESEARCH GUIDELINES

- **Ethical** – to ensure benefits to people affected by the research issue, for example, by verifying findings with workers who are labouring under poor conditions and consulting them about how the research is used. At a minimum, an ethical approach should ensure that it does not harm to communities and that they are informed about the findings and use of the research (see our guideline on **Undertaking Research with Ethics**).

- **Transformational** – to (a) help increase understanding and strengthen the agency and action of people affected by the research issue – in line with Oxfam's commitment to strengthen the voices of poor and marginalized groups, or (b) to help change underlying power relations and structural factors that perpetuate poverty, marginalization and injustice.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Many decisions are needed to design and undertake an appropriate and useful participatory research process. You will need to think carefully about (1) purpose and timeframe, (2) degree and nature of participation, (3) feasibility, (4) power issues, and (5) ethics.

Purpose, approach and timescale

Be clear about of the research purpose. Think through systematically who and why different stakeholders should be involved in the research process, so an appropriate and context-specific research approach can be developed (see Box 1).

Be clear about the time scale of your research. Some participatory research may involve a discrete time period in which participants are consulted on research questions and then asked to comment. In contrast, action research involves a cycle of research, action, reflection and further research, and could last over a period of a few years.

Box 1. Some well-known versions of participation in knowledge production research

- **Participatory research** – an umbrella term for research in which the people affected by the research issue are involved as co-researchers. It comprises a range of approaches and methodologies some of which are outlined below.

- **Participatory learning and action (PLA)** - PLA grew from **participatory rural appraisal (PRA)** - an approach for learning about and engaging with communities that incorporates the knowledge, experiences and views of people in planning and managing policy or programme interventions (Chambers 1997; IIED 1990-2013).

- **Cooperative or collaborative inquiry** aims to involve people affected by the research issue in research decisions as co-researchers. This is sometimes characterized as research *with* rather than *on* people. It creates a research cycle among four different types of knowledge: propositional knowing (such as scientific knowledge), practical knowing (from action and experience), experiential knowing (the feedback from interaction with others) and presentational knowing (developing new images and practices). The research process moves between these four stages with deepening experience and knowledge through each (Heron,1996).

- **Participatory Action Research** values participation and action equally and therefore tries to understand and change the world through cycles of collective action, reflection and action over time. It requires more time than other forms of participatory research (Freire 1972; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005; Reason and Bradbury 2008).

Who to involve

An initial stakeholder analysis can help you think through who to involve, why, in what way and at what stage of the research (see Table 1). Three groups of people matter:

- those who are directly affected by the issue you are researching, e.g. at community level;

- those who can affect or influence the issue, e.g. policy-makers or other target audiences; and

- those with relevant know-how or interests, e.g. experts, staff, allies, donors.

Some groups that are directly affected by the issue being researched may be difficult or impossible to involve, for example young children or people with mental health problems. For research on issues that affect such groups, other ways will be needed to ensure their needs are heard, for example by involving representative individuals and groups.

Table 1: Example of stakeholder analysis for research

List all stakeholders who are affected by, or can affect, the research issue	Degree to which stakeholders are affected by, or can affect, the research issue – *low, medium, high*	Purpose of involving stakeholders in the research, i.e. representational, instrumental, ethical, transformational
Those directly affected by the research issues (example below)		
Men and women living with HIV/AIDS in X area	Low	Gain perceptions Support them to influence services
Those that can affect (or influence) the research issues (example below)		
National policy-makers	High	Influence their attitudes and policies
Government & NGO service deliverers	High	Influence their attitudes and practices
Other relevant stakeholders (example below)		
Experts	Medium (via funding)	Ensure robust research

Degree and nature of participation

Confusion and misunderstandings commonly occur when there is no agreement about the degree and nature of participation at design stage. Are you seeking to inform research participants about the research, consult them via data collection, involve them in joint decision-making or give them control over aspects of the research process? In some forms of participatory research, they have full control. When undertaking community-driven data collection, for example. grassroots organizations collect relevant data to help address their needs (Satterthwaite and Barrett 2017).

Be clear about the extent to which you want, and are able, to share power (see Box 2). Lack of clarity about who has the power and is making the decisions at different research stages can result in tokenism, tensions with, or harm to research participants. Discuss with participants how they want to be involved. You might want it but they might not.

Box 2. Ladders of participation

There are a number of different models – or ladders – of participation which outline different degrees of possible participation. Some are either explicitly or implicitly normative assuming that the highest levels of participation and delegation of control are the most desirable. This is somewhat different to the approach taken in this guide which suggests that the desirable degree of participation will depend on your purpose and task.

Perhaps the best-known is the 'ladder' of participation (proposed by Arnstein 1969). It was developed with reference to citizen participation in democracies. But it has been applied to research projects as well. It starts with **non-participation (manipulation, therapy)**, moves to **tokenism (informing, consultation and placation)** and ends with **citizens' control (partnership, delegation to citizen control)**.

Sarah White (1996) distinguishes between different forms and functions of participation:
- **Nominal participation** is often used by more powerful actors to give legitimacy to development plans. Less powerful people become involved in it through a desire for inclusion. But it is little more than a display, and does not result in change.
- **Instrumental participation** sees community participation being used as a means towards a stated end – often the efficient use of the skills and knowledge of community members in project implementation.
- **Representative participation** involves giving community members a voice in the decision-making and implementation process of projects or policies that affect them. For the more powerful, representative participation increases the chances of their intervention being sustainable; for the less powerful, it may offer a chance for leverage.
- **Transformative participation** results in the empowerment of those involved, and as a result alters the structures and institutions that lead to marginalization and exclusion.

Feasibility

Participatory research can be time-consuming and costly. This should not be an excuse for not doing it – as the consequences of not doing this may be costlier or create harm. If resources are scarce, use your purpose to identify the level of participation that is *needed* rather than *desirable* and adapt your research approach to available time, resources and skills.

The time burden on people can be reduced in creative ways, for example by holding focus groups before or after existing normal gatherings, such as community or programme meetings. You could consider financial compensation for research participants' time – either individually or to their organizations – particularly if they are time or income poor. However, this needs careful thought as financial incentives may create perverse incentives, or crowd out people's intrinsic motivations to participate.

Sensitivity to power imbalances

A key element of participatory research is ensuring that different voices are heard through a safe process. Participants in research should always be able to participate free of fear of judgement or reprisal. This means research leads must be sensitive to and know how to manage power imbalances including:

- Addressing possible barriers to participation relating to time and availability, language;

- Identifying appropriate diversity of respondents and collecting in ways that can disaggregate voices by gender, class, ethnicity and so on;

- Not assuming research respondents represent the views of others like them;

- Interviewing different categories of stakeholders separately where necessary, e.g. interviewing women separately from men, or older women separately from younger women;

- Employing good negotiation and facilitation skills to manage power imbalances in group discussions, encouraging sharing and reducing dominance of some voices;

- Being clear about and documenting their own power and positionality, and the methods they have used; for example, being clear about who has been involved in the analysis and design.

Ethics

As with any research, the highest standards of ethics also apply to participatory researching, including informed consent, confidentially and anonymity, safeguards to protect vulnerable people and children, and recognizing and benefiting research participants for their time. (See our guideline on Undertaking Research with Ethics.)

STAGES OF RESEARCH

To help decide who to involve – and why and how – it is useful to think through the different stages of the research process (see Table 2). You may pass through these stages more than once, so you will need to revise and revisit them during the research process. For example, if you are seeking to strengthen policy, programme or strategy design, or develop solutions, you may need to collect and analyse some initial data to inform the design stage and then collect again after piloting or testing.

Table 2: Involving people at different stages of research

Research Stage and Tasks	Who to involve	Purpose	Options
Consultation on research topic			
Selecting and prioritizing research topic	e.g. relevant staff from organizations involved, key stakeholders affected by, affecting or investing in the research issue	Prioritize research topic	Informal consultation Structured workshop or meeting
Control/manage research process			
Decision-making about research process, resourcing and selection of researchers	e.g. relevant staff from organizations involved and researcher; key stakeholders who are investing in the research including those affected by the research issue	Ensure smooth running	Direct research yourself. Establish an advisory group Establish a steering group with decision-making power for members Consult individually with relevant stakeholders
Design			
Decide research purpose, define	e.g. people affected by the issue;	Help ensure research	Establish an advisory group

research questions and select research approach	representative organizations; donors	relevance and appropriate approach Empowerment of key stakeholders	Establish a steering group with decision making power. Consult individually with relevant stakeholders Interactive research design workshop with key people Vet plans with people who are affected but did not design the process
Literature and desk review			
Identify search topics, terms and literature sources	e.g. people who know about the issue and prior initiatives: • Issues specialists • Practitioners • Programme staff	Ensure relevance and diversity of literature review Ensure you are building your research on existing experiences and adding to those insights	Systematic review Snowballing method – asking key stakeholders to nominate top 5 relevant research items and 5 top people to ask about possible sources Crowd source – ask a wide audience to nominate their 1-3 top research papers
Data collection			
Identify sampling method, sizes and respondents	e.g. researcher; experts and key informants	Ensure rigorous research	Researcher decides Consult with relevant experts (See different methods below)
Identify data collection methods	e.g. researcher; experts	Ensure robust research	Interactive research design workshop with key people, particularly people doing the data collection Vet plans with people who are affected but did not design the process Field test proposed methods
Store and manage data	e.g. researcher, relevant staff person	Keep secure and be conscious of who has access to what data	(See above)
Analyse, interpret and validate data			
Code data (where needed)	e.g. researcher; staff	Ensure robust findings	Researcher decides Researcher proposes and codes are vetted by relevant stakeholders who will be involved in data analysis

			Jointly design in workshop
			Test coding with all stakeholders who will be involved in data analysis
Initial analysis of data	e.g. researchers; data collectors; staff of organizations involved	Ensure robust findings	Researchers analyse. Interactive analysis workshop with key stakeholders Consult with research experts and/or other key stakeholders
Validate data and interpret findings	e.g. researcher; staff; people affected	Ensure accuracy and relevance of findings Empower stakeholders Strengthen research use and impact	Participatory workshops with research participants and/or other key stakeholders Comments or feedback on report Peer review
Use findings to inform future action (if relevant)	e.g. relevant staff from organizations involved, key stakeholders affected by, affecting or investing in the research issue Other people who know about the issue and prior initiatives	Design future design, strategy or solutions	Participatory workshops with research participants and/or other key stakeholders.
Communicate findings			
Communicate findings	e.g. people affected by the issue; allies; target audiences; influential and trusted individuals who can help deliver the messages	Promote research use and impact	Participatory workshops with research participants and/or key stakeholders Jointly create short briefs or infographics in appropriate languages Develop social media dissemination strategy together

CHECKING YOUR RESEARCH STRATEGY IS FIT FOR PURPOSE

Your 'choices for voices' research strategy needs to be fit for purpose. Ask your colleagues to give feedback on your draft research strategy, checking if it:

- has clarity of purpose;

- is appropriate (given the issue, time and resources available);

- is ethical;

- is likely to be reliable and useful, and

- will provide the insights needed.

Piloting participatory research in the field is also important. Don't plan a complex process of research without building in time and resources for a research pilot, after which you can adjust and improve your approach, methods, and training of researchers accordingly.

IDEAS FOR PARTICIPATORY DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Last, but not least, here are some methods for data collection and analysis. Remember though that just because a method is undertaken with a group or involves some drawing or drama, this does not make it participatory in the transformative sense. That can only happen if research participations are in control of the research process.

Table 3: methods for data collection and analysis

Stage of research	Possible research methods
Data collection	
Survey and sampling	**Participatory survey approach** – uses visualization generated through group discussion to show quantitative changes. **Transect walks** – are a type of mapping activity, but they involve actually walking across an area with a community member/group of community members, observing, asking questions and listening as you go. This information is then represented visually in a transect sketch/diagram. **Wealth ranking** – is a tool to identify and understand differences in wealth in a community members by soliciting community members' perceptions or indicators of wealth and getting them to rank people in the community accordingly. **Social mapping** – is a visual method of showing the relative location of households. and the distribution of different types of people (such as male, female, adult, child, landed, landless, literate, and illiterate) together with the **social** structure and. institutions of an area.
Interviewing	**Focus group discussions** – are a form of qualitative research consisting of interviews with a small but diverse group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are also free to talk with other group members. **Semi-structured interviews** – based on a framework of themes but which allow new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says.

Community/ group mapping	**Venn/chapati diagrams** – these diagrams can be used to explore the roles and relationships of individuals, groups and individuals and the links between them. **Group ranking/scoring** – provide a way for community members to weigh up, rate, prioritise items or issues either relative to one another or according to criteria. Tools may include matrix rankings, ladders, spider diagrams. **Time lines** – help to record changes in a community/household/life of an individual over time; noting the important historical markers and milestones of a community or individual, giving a wider historical context. **Most significant change analysis** – a participatory process involving the collection of stories of change and systematically selecting the most significant of those.
Data Analysis	
Participatory analysis of findings	**Collaborative outcomes reporting** – a participatory approach to impact evaluation based around a set of performance stories that present evidence of how a project or programme has contributed to outcomes and impacts, that is then critically reviewed by technical experts and other stakeholders, which may include community members **Participatory group workshops** **Writeshops** **Citizens' juries** – to allow a wider range of people to deliberate on findings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Two excellent websites with tools, examples and ideas about putting participation into action are ActionAid's Networked Toolbox and the IDS Participatory Methods website.

You might also want to check out the Oxfam Research Guidelines on different research methods, including Reviewing the Existing Literature, Researching Human Interest Stories, and Planning Survey Research.

REFERENCES

Arnstein, S. R. (1969) A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35 (4): 216–22.

Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last.* London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Heron, J. 1996. *Cooperative Inquiry: Research into the human condition.* London: Sage.

IIED Participatory Learning and Action series: https://www.iied.org/participatory-learning-action-pla (1990-2013).

Kemmis, S. and R. McTaggart (2005) Participatory action research: communicative action and the public sphere. In: N. Denzin, and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd Edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage. 559-603.

Reason, P. and H. Bradbury (eds.) (2008) *The Sage Handbook of Action Research. Participative Inquiry and Practice* (2nd edition). London: Sage.

Satterthwaite, D and S. Barrett (2017) *Community-driven Data Collection in Informal Settlements.* Better Evidence in Action Toolkit, IIED. https://www.alnap.org/help-library/community-driven-data-

collection-in-informal-settlements

White, S. (1996) Depoliticizing development: the uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice* 6 (1), 6–15.

LINKS

All links last accessed March 2019.

Oxfam Research Guidelines: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/research-guidelines

Integrating Gender in Research Planning: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/integrating-gender-in-research-planning-620621

Undertaking Research with Ethics: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/undertaking-research-with-ethics-253032

Conducting Focus Groups: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/conducting-focus-groups-578994

Conducting Semi-structured Interviews: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/conducting-semi-structured-interviews-252993

Networked Toolbox (ActionAid): http://www.networkedtoolbox.com/

Participatory Methods website (Institute of Development Studies, IDS): https://www.participatorymethods.org/

Reviewing the Existing Literature: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/reviewing-the-existing-literature-252995

Researching Human Interest Stories: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/researching-human-interest-stories-253014

Planning Survey Research: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/planning-survey-research-578973