Handout on Participatory Action Research
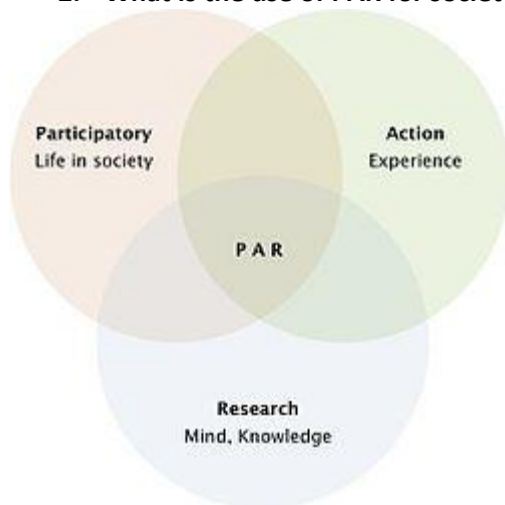
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This handout draws on the presentation of PAR in Wikipedia and in scientific literature. We hope this gives you an introduction to the concept and that you will be inspired to read more about it after our workshop.

1. **What is Participatory Action Research (PAR) and how it came about?**

In 1940 Kurt Lewin began implementing this type of research in the US Army. He wanted to create a mechanism for solving problems together with the soldiers, breaking the rigid hierarchy barriers and bringing about real changes. Lewin proposed a way to solve problems collectively, that would transform the increasing unhappiness of the low-levels in the army and avoid decision-making mistakes at the highest levels. So PAR is *a form of influence* (even a kind of indirect participation in some areas of decision-making process) that doesn't erode hierarchies.

PAR was later picked up in community organizing, development and social and anti-poverty work. It has been used in the civil rights, gender, literacy, youth and in development work. Freire, Borda and others used it as a way to promote engagement of grassroots groups in finding right solutions to common problems and in democratizing science, research and decision-making. **For anti-poverty activists, PAR is an important tool of democratizing decision-making and bringing about collective participation in developing common knowledge and understanding of the realities and for proposing effective policy solutions.**

2. **What is the use of PAR for society as a whole?**

[Chevalier and Buckles](), 2103, p. 10 (source Wikipedia)

The leading idea of PAR is to emphasize that **participatory research** is not only for a specific group, such as poor people and their organisations – it is useful and necessary for our societies as a whole.

If there are strong hierarchies (formal or informal) in a given society, then PAR is a useful and even necessary instrument. For example, PAR is an instrument that can ensure democracy in the former "Socialist Block" countries, confronted with a lack of effective democratic institutions and of a real democratic political decision making process. Even in countries with old democratic traditions there are always calls for more democracy.

The expected result of this situation is that the political decision making process is in trouble. Probably most of us would agree that policies, especially economic and social ones, have been more or less wrong for the last 3-4 decades. At least more and more people don't approve these policies.

We hear more and more often of claims of knowledge-based or evidence-based policies. However, we also hear more frequently of decisions or policies that were put in place based on wrong knowledge. By involving people living in poverty and their organisations as well as other groups in analyzing, understanding and developing solutions – we will have more collectively owned decisions and policy results. For example, N. Sarkozy had proposed to "… to leave the civilization of experts and to start to discuss problems together." This is largely a reflection on the kind of systems we are part of, where depending on the resources available and the options of influence, some knowledge dominates decisions. So a big problem of our societies is that not only policies - the knowledge is also in trouble. For instance, currently the famous research of Reinhart and Rogoff – This Time is Different - that provided scientific basis for budget discipline and austerity measures – turned out to be full of mistakes.

Science and research and knowledge that it produces, needs to become PARTICIPATORY and more DEMOCRATIC. This will make policies more adequate and responding to the needs and reality of the majority in the society.

A simple PAR process follows the following steps:
Observe =>Reflect=>Plan=>Act – and again, from the beginning…

Start with the values that society wants to uphold
Think of all the actors that should be involved in the process
Start to observe, analyse and try to understand the reality and the way the policies are keeping or changing this reality
Think of solutions and plan some changes
Begin implementing some of these changes
Observe how these changes are making a difference for better or worse
Analyse and reflect with the same actors how this can change
Develop new solutions together
Begin implementing and see how the changes are influencing…

3. **How can PAR be used in anti-poverty work? Let's try it out together.**