

# Untaming aid through action research: Seeking transformative reflective action

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## **Abstract**

Planned international development—Official Development Assistance (ODA) —pretends to address complex, intergenerational problems. The pretense is endemic to, and necessary for, the continuation of the development enterprise, leading to docile projects. ODA’s methodologies and methods are ill-matched for confronting such problems, while those of action research are well-suited to the task. Yet ODA and action research are only infrequent and ephemeral bedmates. Research from five sites on three continents reveals five lessons for untaming aid through action research: 1) Plan and develop programming iteratively and over long time frames to offer meaningful support to people’s lives, 2) develop new connective tissue and relational capital, 3) commit to inquiry and learning in specific contexts, 4) incrementally confront culturally embedded practice in a safe and feasible manner, and 5) use methodology to develop safe and participatory spaces that engage tacit and explicit perspectives and ways of knowing. This article, the introductory essay to the Action Research Journal’s special issue, “Aid, Development, Social Transformation,” argues that adoption of these five practices could untame ODA and make it more powerful, ethical, and transformative.

## **Keywords**

International development; social transformation; methodology; program design

How can international aid be more socially transformative? What would need to be different about practitioners who intervene in other people's lives, about their understanding of context and institutions that enable and constrain interventions, about aid practices if transformative change is desired?

By transformative change, we signal an interest in a particular genre of development problems. The genre has many names. Rittel and Weber (1973) call them wicked problems. Political scientists favor intractable problems. Others settle for complex problems (Snowden & Boone, 2007). VUCA (for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) is a buzzword from the military and now current in business circles. Specific examples of such problems? Racial and gender inequality and inequity. Intergenerational poverty and its doppelganger wealth inequality. Climate change and, more broadly, environmental injustice. Human resource obsolescence in an age of artificial intelligence and automation.

Such problems are never solved, and only in the most long-term and theoretical manner are they amenable to win-win, increase-the-size-of-the-pie strategies. In the shorter term, equilibria seem to be reached, then breached. To make a change means that some groups give something up, others gain and yet others stay the same, even as no single actor is at the helm steering these exchanges. To make a change means to arouse ideologies and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Change in any direction will be contested on moral, ethical, and philosophical grounds. Any change creates conflict somewhere in the adaptive system; winners and losers, beneficiaries and victims emerge from all interactions. There is no cure, no antidote, only constant experimentation and recalibrations.

Wicked (or intractable, or complex) problems are problems of powers, plural. Power flows through language, symbolism, economic policies and statutes, educational institutions and social networks. In its flow and wake are enacted access to opinion amplification, political values and ideologies of correct behavior.

Planned international development—Official Development Assistance and private philanthropy—pretends to address such problems. The pretense is endemic to, and necessary for the continuation of, the development enterprise. Making substantive changes in these problems requires social transformation. Yet social transformation is a phrase sometimes deployed as part of a critique of mainstream development:

In general, the concept of societal transformation in the social sciences refers to the change of society's systemic characteristics. This incorporates the change of existing parameters of a societal system, including technological, economic, political and cultural restructuring. [T]his ... influences productive infrastructure... new patterns of participation in the international division of labour... new structures of economic organization...[T]he distribution and use of political power take qualitatively different forms. This involves changes in the structure and performance of state institutions and other bodies of decision-making and control. Finally, a society's value-normative system can change, often in a way that allows the emergence and stabilisation of pluralist institutions (UNESCO, n.d.)

The above quote might feel tame and bureaucratic to the action research community. However, to counterpose development and transformation exposes the conundrum that defines the enterprise of ODA and its kin, private philanthropy. How does one develop a place and people—e.g. alleviate poverty, reorder gender relationships, fulfill basic human rights—without transforming that place and people? Well, one does not. But many excellent development professionals – northern, southern, eastern, or western, in-patriates or expatriates – disagree, and for not superficial reasons. Who should decide, they ask, what aid is meant to transform? Where would transformation end and meddling in another people's internal affairs begin? Yet many other development professionals, we contend, do not grapple with these questions at all—they do not see their task as political, their terrain as contested, their horizon as generational. Development is achieved without the messy work of transforming people's lives. Visions of change in programs and projects deftly bypass structural constraints and power brokers that govern the most important rules of the game. In a commitment to facts without values, dominant practice therefore becomes highly focused on standardized tools, decontextualized and rinsed of nuance, disturbingly

divorced from the politics of human relating and the worldviews and practices that enable and constrain change.

Action researchers see our craft as an emancipatory practice. By emancipatory we mean taking reflective action and generating knowledge from action in empathetic relationships that generate increased autonomy for those who participate in the process. We favor democratizing access to knowledge and knowledge generation, and broadening spaces for action for all people to improve their own lives and communities. And we attempt, sometimes uncomfortably, to place our own transformation into the picture — affecting and being affected and not just intervening to improve others. The work is counter-hegemonic and, in international development, has a long history of confronting and complementing the discursive practices, conventions, and ways of knowing of dominant blocs (we need only look to Robert Chambers' early career for the evidence). Over time, however, the development enterprise has defused, defanged, declawed, and domesticated action research, lumping it under generic labels (e.g. participatory methods, tools for community participation) that more often instrumentalize and create obedience than transform.

The purpose of this special issue of the Action Research Journal is to name this marginalization and to seek insights – practical, practice-focused insights – about how action research methodology in its most liberatory and transformative forms might help ODA tackle wicked, intractable, complex problems. The special issue builds on a long history of action research for social transformation and emancipation within international development efforts. Within this history we are particularly inspired and motivated by the 2013 special issue of the *IDS Bulletin*, “Action Research for Development and Social Change,” which exposes the need to ground inquiry in systemic relationships and complexity while avoiding the romanticization of action research (Burns et al, 2012). This special issue investigates the extent to which action research – if more broadly adopted by change agents, communities, funders, and policy makers—plays and might play a more powerful role in untaming aid, in nudging aid policies and philanthropic practices towards more emancipatory ends. Table 1 summarizes the aims of this special issue.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

### **What we heard from our authors**

Our authors use action research in varied ways to support transformation in international development contexts. Locating themselves in spaces where aid engages people and communities with unique history and culture, our authors tackle some of the world's most intractable problems: impending destruction of coastal and lacustrine livelihoods due to climate change; gender inequality and poverty; intergenerational inequity; violence against young women; and capturing gains from a globalizing economy while deepening social capital and promoting respect for local culture and history. Each study focuses on what works – what makes a positive difference – while specifying challenges, hurdles, and failures encountered along the way. We share five insights from across the articles:

*The future is unknown and outside of our control. Plan and develop programming iteratively and over long time frames to offer meaningful support to people's lives.*

While researchers forged operational agreements about activities and objectives for pragmatic reasons, over time they (re) negotiated the ideal future state – e.g. women's economic status and relationship to men, how to protect adolescent girls from violence and loss of autonomy, etc. – seeking advances that resonated with local stakeholders' actual needs. This required continual adaptation to changing circumstances, even when demands emerged that were initially off the menu.

For example, when communities requested support to improve soil fertility—an area that was outside of World Fish expertise—the program team shifted significant resources to be responsive to this need.

According to the authors, this request

highlights a common challenge facing many agencies in development – when the local community asks for a service that they do not generally provide. This inability of external

agents to respond appropriately to needs on-the-ground is one of the reasons that people in this area of Malaita are marginalized in the first place (Apgar et. al., this issue)

In Bangladesh, Seferiadis et. al. explicitly sought alternatives ‘to failed “projectized” approaches in which problems and solutions are predefined, with little regard given to specific concerns from local contexts.’ They made significant shifts in project intentions—limiting trainings to the most profitable income generating activities (IGAs) topics; removing participant stipends once they saw there were ineffective; and sharpening their participant selection criteria to take into account how local cultural norms made it nearly impossible for unmarried women to participate (yet married and divorced women could do so). In Ethiopia, Lackovich-Van Gorp and her co-researcher, Workenesh, shifted project focus from childhood marriage to forced childhood marriage by abduction, a practice that had much more emotional resonance with the women involved. The Lake Dunga tourism project also used an adaptive approach, where Jernsand and her co-researcher let one activity lead to another, with final outcomes remaining uncertain.

Seferiadis et. al. explain that interventions that address complex issues such as poverty alleviation and unequal gender relations require longer timescales to generate positive spirals as the basis of sustainable change. Our researchers’ ability to immerse themselves in local spaces, slow down and think long enabled them to develop trusting relationships and more relevant interventions than are possible with short-term interventions and horizons.

***Tangible progress emerges from new social connections between previously separated or loosely connected agents. Develop new connective tissue and social capital.***

Our authors showed that relationship-building was not only a prerequisite to action, but was in fact one of the most important outcomes of their work. For example, Seferiadis et. al. note that improved livelihoods from IGAs were dependent not only on new skills and tangible resources, but on the ability to develop networks of social relations. As one project participant said:

People who have lots of friends, who communicate freely with others, they progress. But people who are poor, who cannot communicate nicely, their progress is not like that. They don't know other people; they cannot get information (Seferiadis et. al., this issue).

The authors realized that increased knowhow of social interaction was likely more important than the agricultural techniques that were the focus of much of their training.

The cultivation of social capital was also prominent in the Solomon Islands project, where project partners increased their access to networks of rural farmers and to each other, and where coalition members are now inviting each other to join each other's workshops. Apgar et. al. tie these outcomes to their use of Theory of Change (TOC) methodology, which helped them understand early in their planning process that the ultimate success of their work depended on building a coalition across organizations and sectors that do not usually work together. Johnson reveals that new social relationships and ways of construing the other – in this case adults' and policy makers' views on the value of children's and youth's evidence – played an important role in community processes more supportive of young people's flourishing. Jernsand argues that starting slow and spending many weeks and months building trust and mutual knowledge, sans logframe or project plan, made future collaborations speedier and prepared the ground for difficult conversations about, for example, gender relations.

***Surfacing conflicting accounts and engaging diverse knowledge is more relevant than “best practice.”***

***Commit to inquiry and learning in specific contexts.***

All our authors hold the idea of best practice lightly, preferring to seek opportunities based on a deep study of local context and relevance. Johnson and Apgar et. al. in particular highlight how surfacing assumptions and engaging diverse knowledge from new stakeholders were key preconditions for shifting important conversations.

Johnson's work in Nepal shows how context strongly influences the impact of participatory mechanisms. Increasing young people's participation depended very directly on first

understanding the places and spaces that [children and young people] inhabit: political, cultural and physical context, including beliefs and attitudes towards childhood and children, and the relational power dynamics with peers and adults in communities, both in their everyday lives and in how they interact in [participatory action research] PARs.

This meant working with them in situ rather than inviting them into adult-dominated or other spaces divorced from everyday rhythms. Participation by and incorporation of knowledge from youths helped reveal unintended consequences of past interventions, led to more appropriate designs for water access for kids, and influenced the way implementing organizations designed their interventions, including creating spaces for dialogue across generations.

Apgar et. al.'s Solomon Islands project also paid critical attention to context by articulating an equity principle to focus on the poor and marginalized, and then by deeply studying 'social norms and power dynamics at play in the context of the interventions and paying attention to who was and was not participating.' Discussions on a rubric for defining quality partnership opened up important conversations not only on how current relationships stood, but more importantly on the need 'to move from a 'consultation' mode of participation to building co-researcher relationships, representing acknowledgement of the need to move along a participation continuum.' The authors note that critical reflection with diverse actors in their PAR processes led to expanding research into areas previously overlooked (such as nutrition) and broke down some long-standing barriers to organizations working together.

***Transformation is not always the right approach. Seek opportunities for incremental change to confront culturally embedded practice in a safe and feasible manner.***

Seferiadis et. al. argue that women in Bangladesh did not wish to engage in confrontation with their husbands or communities. With women navigating the boundaries, the project supported empowerment and stimulated change in harmony with dominant customs instead of aiming at radical, sudden

transformation of women's lives. Methodologically, this was aided by the use of participatory visualization methods, which allowed the women to reveal only what they wanted to reveal, including important evidence of empowerment. During a Photovoice activity, one woman staged a photograph with her husband in which she was giving him money, representing her new power to earn income and contribute to the household income. Similarly, in Ethiopia, Lackovich-Van Gorp et. al. avoided cultural backlash. They listened to local women who made it clear that men could not be involved in the action research discussions, as *the conversation itself was subversive*. Creating a safe space for collaboration with the participants was the most important methodological choice in this sense, followed by use of a positive deviance approach (PD): PD promoted subtle behavior change that did not create discomfort in the community 'by uncovering hitherto unknown community solutions that, given their local origins, [were] more socially and culturally acceptable than imported "best" or "good" practice, or pilot innovations.' PD changed only what was absolutely necessary to nudge the problem in a positive direction.

***Diverse, untapped local knowledge is the most relevant knowledge for local change processes. Use methodology<sup>1</sup> to develop safe and participatory spaces that engage tacit and explicit perspectives and ways of knowing.***

We must go beyond the tactics of specific methods and think more strategically about overall design. Johnson shows that innovative participatory methods, for example, are ineffectual sans addressing intergenerational relationships and power dynamics between children and adult decision-makers. To dig deeper into assumptions in a theory of change development and review process, Apgar et. al. make a case for engaging in critical reflection alongside tangible interventions, while simultaneously building skills for ongoing real-time reflection and learning. They caution us to be ready for tensions that arise when bringing diverse actors together and building new ways of working collectively to reach the most marginalized. They emphasize the need for high investment in capacity development of designers and managers of project monitoring and evaluation who, they argue

must be embedded in implementation processes and working along-side facilitators, to learn themselves how to make a complex idea work in context and to facilitate experiential learning of local teams as they open up potentially transformative pathways.

Jernsand highlights how embodied and situated learning allows participants to engage local knowledge in intuitive ways. In one case, a workshop was held outdoors near a lake so that participants could feel the atmosphere, point at specific situations and places, and easily connect to what a tour could be like in the future. In another, they modeled a paper prototype to develop guided tours and another to brainstorm and test a cultural museum and event. The visualization and prototyping led to the addition of crafts, food, and storytelling as part of the tours, and improved infrastructure through the implementation of waste management and signage systems. Visual tools were used throughout, to enhance idea generation and communication.

### **Key messages from practitioners**

Given our concern to connect action research with development practice, we asked five practitioner-academics to review the contributions to this special issue. How does the research resonate with their years of practice, and how will it help them and others in the future? Their appreciations follow each article. Together, however, the five short appreciative essays pose four questions.

### ***How might we come to terms with danger and threats that emerge during processes of change?***

The need for incremental change to confront culturally embedded practice in a safe and feasible manner resonated with Elisa Martinez. But incrementalism, Martinez notes, still exposes positive deviants to public surveillance and so to significant dangers. Because women's visibility is never apolitical in patriarchal contexts, she implores us to work proactively and plan defensively with members of the community who may come under this form of scrutiny. In his appreciation of the Dunga experience, David Week openly wonders if social transformation or transformational learning are relevant goals from the perspective of local actors. He highlights how Jernsand's elucidation of tensions between internal dynamics of community development and the imposed constraints of external agents (e.g. financial,

technical, academic) may help others mitigate expectations to generate "transformational change" in advance of knowing the concrete situation and lived experience of particular communities.

***How do we remain focused on altering unjust systems and the power relations that underpin them?***

If gender inequality is a significant driver of women's poverty and marginalization, Skip Bivens asks, what gets lost by not reflecting on the unjust nature of those relationships? Should action research introduce critical reflection about the systemic challenges participants face, even in a sensitive context? At what point is an incrementalist approach apologist? In a similar vein, Martinez fears that if we hold structural transformation too loosely, we may place too much responsibility on women and girls to speak up for themselves (albeit in acceptable ways), while leaving systems of cultural and economic relations that oppress them intact.

***How might we reframe participation as engagement to develop local solutions?***

Week points out that communities have their own development trajectory prior to, greater than and continuing after, the minor intervention that constitutes a development project. Therefore, bringing stakeholders together to discuss problems, make plans, try things out—and in the process get to know, adapt to and cope with each other's interest—is overtly political and stands in contrast to a common development norm. Drawing from the Catholic Social Teaching concept of subsidiarity, Guy Sharrock explains that although much project strategy is dictated from above, people who are closer to the problem have a better understanding of the issues at hand. There is therefore significant untapped potential for delegating community members and field-level staff as the most important decision-makers for determining the strategic direction of interventions. Week argues that if a development project is successful, it is because outsiders – not community members – have become effective 'participants.' Together, our practitioner reviewers call for a new definition of successful or effective participation, one that equates it with the generation of acceptable local solutions via ongoing reflective practice. Action research is essential here because of the need for equalizing power relations and, so, producing more honest conversations about ownership and expertise.

*How might we make the case that longer time horizons and new measurement approaches are needed for addressing underlying causes of poverty and marginalization in increasingly complex, rapidly evolving contexts?*

Bivens suggests that showing examples of incremental learning and project design adaptation makes a persuasive argument for emergent project design, one which leaves the future usefully open.

Nevertheless, in an aid environment that demands quick results, Andrea Roderick asks: ‘How can we cultivate the space for meaningful engagement of those who are typically on the edges of decision making in society? How do we remain true to addressing the underlying causes of poverty and marginalization in increasingly complex contexts that are evolving rapidly?’ She explains that potential benefits from the use of action research embedded in local development processes can only be harnessed if practitioners / researchers and decision-makers share an understanding of how this kind of research differs from mainstream research methodologies and products, and how they should be measured. Sharrock adds that TOC processes can help, but only when understood as both a process and a product. We should evaluate TOC on whether its use encourages ongoing critical, or evaluative thinking—motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness (and a belief in the value of evidence)—without becoming myopically fixated on target achievement. He warns that we must remain alert to the conceptual and operational limitations of the TOC-based approach, particularly given the contextual pressures to use it instrumentally without affecting actual planning behaviors.

**Conclusion**

The divide between those who call for fast, efficient, scalable, quantifiable, and replicable improvements in human lives – and the methodologies and methods to do this – and those who plead for a turn towards social knowledge, depth, and alternative valuations of change is as wide as it has ever been. Proponents of the latter approach critique mainstream methodologies, methods and forms of success measurement as a reproduction of colonial forms of development and control, a methodological panopticon that produces projects strikingly similar to Foucault’s (1995 [1977]) docile bodies. Proponents of the former believe

efficiency, scale, and replicability are moral and ethical imperatives permitting responses that match the size of problems.

Earlier in this essay we wrote that, 'Power flows through language, symbolism, economic policies and statutes, educational institutions and social networks. In its flow and wake are enacted access to opinion amplification, political values and ideologies of correct behavior.' Methodologies and methods of inquiry get attached to people and institutions, they get promoted or stifled, they get taught or not, they get embedded in how we define problems, stakeholders, and what counts as success. We learn to talk in acceptable ways, to be approved by others; in so doing, some of us get access to tools and instruments to amplify our opinions: blogs, television and radio, special issues of academic journals, and purse strings of bilateral aid. Dissent and critique of this kind is not counter-hegemonic; it defines hegemony. It is what is allowable.

The work included in this special issue is counter-hegemonic. Authors reveal concrete places, spaces, and techniques for transforming the hegemony that comprises our knowledge divide. In so doing, they suggest a methodological synthesis. Iterative, emergent, long-term action research without accountability to assess change is arrogant. ODA without pluralizing knowledge, dialogue about competing values, and inter-generational time frames is humiliating for recipients. Small scale, highly localized action research without urgency that the world's intractable problems require broader movements may be self-limiting or even selfish. ODA without trust, mutual accountability, and mutual learning is condescending. Divided, we contribute to the perpetuation of colonial development, to manipulating the levers of the development enterprise while commanding citizens to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. United, we could untame aid and point it ever more ethically and responsibly towards deep structural causes of our planets most wicked, intractable, and complex problems.

#### ENDNOTES

1. We understand methodology as the logic that underlies actions taken when intervening in a situation (Checkland, 1999). Methodology reveals the strategy and motivations behind choice of

methods and tools (Sumner and Tribe, 2008). Methodology may manifest as an approach, a design, or a plan intended to engage and increase people's knowledge, change people's minds, mobilize resources, or simply enter into relevant conversations. Methodologies point to methods and techniques that are relevant for taking specific actions to engage specific knowledges and in real-life contexts. In the context of this special edition we situate methodology within the paradigm or epistemological base of action research—a democratic and participatory orientation to knowledge creation (with, not on people) that brings together action and reflection, theory and practice in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (Bradbury, 2015). The choice of a particular epistemological base will lead to a preference for a particular method. In other words, researchers tend to choose (consciously or unconsciously) research methods that are compatible with their ideologies about the world and their understandings of the nature of knowledge and social reality. Thus, the selection of methodology is always political.

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