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## Participatory Action Research as a Platform for Community Engagement in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Institutions of higher education throughout the world have reached consensus in terms of their core business, defined through: (1) teaching and learning, (2) research and (3) community engagement. Of these three areas of focus, community engagement has posed serious challenges in terms of clear cut methodologies and measurability. While the ‘why’ question of community engagement may be understood, the ‘how to do it’ questions need attention. This has also raised anxiety amongst staff, who are expected to perform and get rewards for community engagement. It is against this background that this article argues for Participatory Action Research (PAR) as an enabling platform for community engagement in higher education.

The argument and assumption is that PAR provides a two-way engagement process that locks in both the researchers and communities they will be reaching, in seeking to solve community problems. PAR moves higher education from linear-oriented research to web-oriented systematic cycles of inquiry that involve planning, asking questions, taking action, observing, evaluating and critically reflecting, prior to planning the next cycles. Community problems that could be addressed through PAR include those arising from environmental damage (including climate change), HIV and AIDS, lack of service delivery, politics and many more.

### Résumé

Les établissements d’enseignement supérieur du monde entier sont parvenus à un consensus autour de leurs activités principales, définies par: (1) l’enseignement et la formation, (2) la recherche et (3) l’engagement communautaire. De ces trois domaines d’intérêt, l’engagement communautaire est celui qui a posé le plus de défis en termes de méthodologies et de mesurabilité. Si la question de l’engagement communautaire peut être

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comprise, la façon de le pratiquer requiert plus d'attention. Ceci a également soulevé l'inquiétude du personnel prévu pour effectuer et obtenir des récompenses pour l'engagement communautaire. C'est dans ce contexte que cet article plaide en faveur de la Recherche-Action Participative (RAP) comme plate-forme propice à l'engagement communautaire dans l'enseignement supérieur.

L'argument est que la RAP fournit un processus d'engagement bi-directionnel qui oblige les chercheurs autant que les communautés à résoudre les problèmes communautaires. La RAP déplace l'enseignement supérieur d'un modèle de recherche linéaire vers un modèle de réseaux de cycles d'enquêtes qui impliquent planification, mesure, observation, évaluation et réflexion critique avant de planifier les cycles suivants. Les problèmes communautaires qui pourraient être traités à travers la RAP découlent notamment des atteintes à l'environnement (y compris le changement climatique), le VIH et le sida, le manque de prestation de services, la politique et bien d'autres.

### **Introduction**

Many questions can be asked with regards to the subject of community engagement. What is community engagement? Who is the community? How do we engage the community? Is community engagement a discipline? What forms of community engagement exist? Is there any particular form of community engagement? When do we engage the community? Why do we engage the community? Which methodologies are most appropriate to facilitate community engagement in institutions of higher education? All these questions cannot be answered in a single article. This article presents Participatory Action Research (PAR) as one of the many dimensions of Action Research. Institutions of higher education are faced with a huge challenge in terms of making their research and teaching relevant in practice. To this end, research methods such as PAR can provide a platform upon which the relevance of university research and teaching to communities can be improved (Baskerville & Myers 2004). Popularised in the 1990s, PAR has its roots in Action Research that emerged in the 1940s.

Institutions of higher education define their core business through three major lenses: teaching and learning, research and community engagement. However, due to the traditional orientation in terms of perspectives that viewed institutions of higher education as faculties that generate knowledge through research to be distributed to those without, there has always been a power gradient in favour of university communities. Even the teaching and learning models were mainly based on chalk and talk, with the lecturers having overwhelming power in final decisions regarding the fate of learners.

Assumptions of prior learning were ignored and learners were viewed as empty vessels. In terms of research, communities were viewed as incubators of research through their involvement in a passive nature that required them to answer questions and provide answers required by academics. PAR has been widely used across disciplines within institutions of higher education. The Global Alliance on Community Engagement Research – GACER (2009) views community engagement in higher education as providing an incubator for knowledge creation and mobilisation in response to the global sustainable development challenges.

In South Africa, as is the case globally, the concept community engagement is still under refinement. This is true, given that the latest publication from the South African Council of Higher Education (CHE) is still seeking clarity on the subject matter. Professor Martin Hall (Vice Chancellor of the University of Salford and Professor Emeritus with the University of Cape Town) in his paper entitled ‘Community engagement in South African higher education’ writes:

The objective of this paper is to bring together perspectives on community engagement in South African Higher Education in order to assist the National Research Foundation (NRF) in drawing up a programme for funding research in this area, to inform the further development of the Council on Higher Education’s (CHE) quality evaluation criteria for community engagement, and to contribute to the CHE’s advice to the Minister of Education on the appropriate place of community engagement in the national Higher Education system (Hall 2010:1).

Hall goes further and warns that there are questions still being raised in terms of the scope and definition of community engagement. Such is the contested nature of community engagement and the quest for more clarity. There could be as many definitions in terms of community engagement as there are communities themselves. However, if community engagement means everything, then it probably means nothing at all.

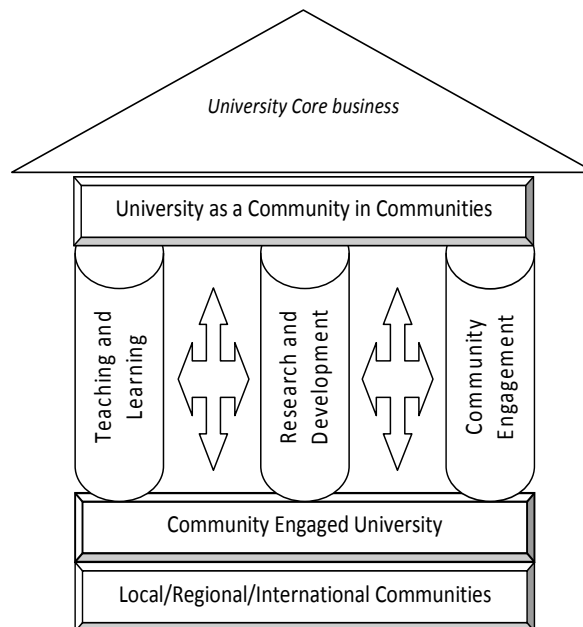
### **The Place of Community Engagement in Universities**

The ranking in terms of especially academic staff in universities is primarily based on what an academic has published. Since measuring progress is quantitative (probably drawing from the predominantly quantitative approaches to research), the number of publications earns one’s promotion from junior lecturer, to lecturer, to senior lecturer, to associate professor and full professor. In other instances, the rank of senior professor is accorded. The academic promotions criteria means that even the tuition aspect gets

affected negatively as many universities find it difficult to assess tuition for promotion purposes. Hence, recognition for researchers of the year, unlike educator of the year and community engagement personality of the year, usually takes priority. To date, very few lecturers have been promoted based on excellence in tuition or community engagement. However, many universities set promotion criteria that recognise the three core business areas. For the purposes of this work, a model depicting the three pillars of university core business is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 presents a scenario in which, for budgetary purposes, community engagement must be viewed and represented as the third independent arm of university core business. In terms of implementation, community engagement should be considered as cross cutting. This implies that university staff, especially the academic ones, should integrate community engagement into teaching and learning, as well as into research. This way, community engagement becomes a pillar and foundation to university core business. Universities must be relevant to the local, national, regional and international communities. Institutions of higher education are therefore communities within communities.

**Figure 1:** University Core Business Model



**Source:** Author

### **Methodological Orientation**

This article is largely a survey of literature on methodologies that facilitate effective community engagement between institutions of higher education (particularly, universities) and their communities. The article is based on an assumption that a university is a community within a community. Among some of the communities that universities interact with are its own students, businesses, governments, non-governmental organisations, political parties, other universities, donors, media, etc. Aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis as well as Critical Document Analysis methodologies inform the manner in which the literature survey has been enriched in terms of analysis (Van Dijk 1997; Sandig & Selting 1997). A reflexive approach was also embarked on in order to tease out new insights from the documentation of PAR as a platform for community engagement in institutions of higher education.

### **Unpacking Community Engagement**

This article will not devote much space to defining the concept community engagement as there will probably be no consensus in this regard. Instead, an attempt will be made to describe the meaning of community engagement. In simple terms, a community refers to a group of people within a socio-political context, but also to non-living things like soil, rocks, air and water. When one talks of community engagement, many are quick to think of a poor community; a community that requires help. Depending on the focus of one's work and form of engagement, a community also refers to very rich groups and also professional clusters. Engagement could be thought of as commitment. Holland (2005) suggests that in the USA the term engagement entered higher education vocabulary in 1994. This was when the then President of the American Association of Higher Education focused on the topic 'engaged institutions'.

In my view, the notion of community engagement brings into the picture aspects of: citizenship, relationships, democracy, diversity, partnerships, histories, collaboration, conflicts, entertainment, power, politics, money, rule of law, governance, accountability, social contexts, winners, losers, knowledge construction, protectionism, dominance, competition, poverty encounters, desire to solve problems and many more facets of life. The terms noted above are the reason why it will be futile to try and get to an agreed definition of community engagement. To simplify the realities associated with community engagement in institutions of higher education, a number of models have emerged. Some are briefly considered in the following paragraphs.

Bender (2008) observes that there is a huge gap in terms of structural and functional conceptual models for community engagement in South African higher education. This is not a problem for South Africa alone, as GACER (2009) made a similar observation concerning higher education and community engagement at a global level. The GACER proposes an Action Plan for University-Community Engagement for Societal Change and Development. This model, it is portrayed, 'unleashes the resources of higher education and government, in collaboration with civil society and its socio-economic development actors to create the sustainable world we want' (ibid. 1). The GACER is the creation of representatives of universities, networks and civil society.

Bender (2008) further identifies three models for community engagement in higher education namely: the Silo, Intersectional and Infusion (cross-cutting) models. From her perspective, the Silo model recognises community engagement as a separate and mainly voluntary activity for the university academics. Within this set-up, the greater allocation of resources (including money, staff and time) goes to research, followed by teaching and learning and a small portion left for community service. The use of the term community service (outreach) as opposed to engagement denotes the predominantly one-way type of association mentioned in the University of South Africa Community Engagement and Outreach Policy (Unisa 2008).

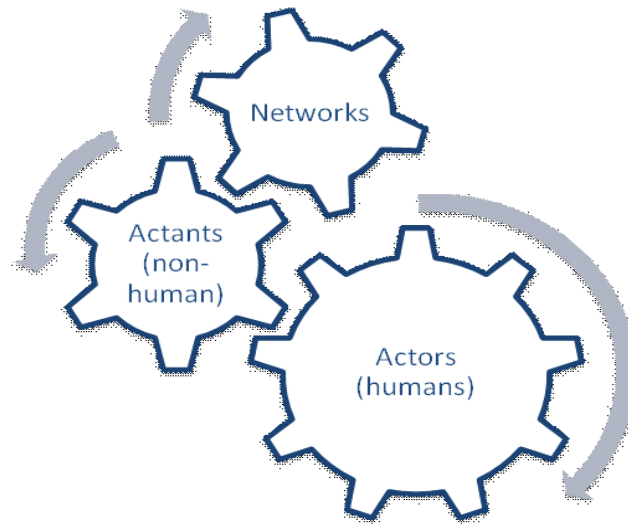
The Intersectional Model for Community Engagement Acknowledges that the three core businesses of the university have an intersection that can be illustrated in a Venn diagram. Where tuition, research and development as well as community service intersect, there will be service-learning and community-based research (Bender 2008). In the event that there is no intersection, this results in community outreach and volunteerism which continues in discrete forms. The Intersection Model conceptualises community engagement as an irreducible and inevitable component of the ongoing university activities. Hence, the assumption is that all university tuition and research takes some form of community engagement, be it direct or indirect. Contested features like scholarly publications, research technical reports, media coverage and public forums all become community engagement ventures. From this model, Bender concurs that universities will not require a radical transformation towards community engagement as they have been, they are and they always will be engaging the communities through the nature of their core business. The third model – Infusion (cross-cutting) or 'Community-engaged university', identifies universities as fulfilling twin core businesses: tuition as well as research and development. From this

perspective, community engagement becomes a fundamental idea and dimension infused in and integrated within the twin core businesses. Community engagement therefore becomes the foundation of all university business.

A review of the three models presented by Bender points us to two fundamentals: (1) there is no one, true model of community engagement, and (2) we need to consider community engagement on a continuum as universities aim to move from low community engagement to the highest form of community engagement. Issues with regard to who is driving the process of community engagement and for what reason come into play as well. In addition, issues of participation, power play, actors, actants, networks and the social contexts also emerge. Bender goes further and notes that community engagement provokes change management within institutions of higher education. Both the academic and non-academic staff should be involved in this change process. Challenges associated with financing (both within and outside the university) need to be addressed. In the South African context, the question then arises: How can community engagement be measured and subsidised under the outputs and subsidy policy? This is a question that lies outside the scope of this article. Challenges within global universities also emerge concerning the hiring and promotion criteria.

Given that communities will never be homogenous, there will be no strait jacket in terms of community engagement. Usually, the 'rich' within a given social context, be it in terms of financial resources, political power and other linkages, call the shots. One should also realise the richness in community diversity and the dynamics thereof. Borrowing from the Actor/Actant Network Theory (Nhamo 2006) this article advocates an understanding of community engagement by identifying three major facets that drive the process, namely: actors (humans), actants (non-humans) and their networks (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Actors, Actants and Networks in Communities



**Source:** Author

Examples of non-human elements include mobile phones, documents, meeting places, computers, water, rail and road networks, historical contexts that shape narratives by the communities and serve as reference points. The three facets interact in space and over time to discursively construct their realities and knowledge forms. The actors, actants and networks within the community are highly complex. These have relational orientations that operate at various geographical and spatial levels. Hence what could be identified as a localised network can be linked to regional and international networks. Information flow within communities is not only limited to the smaller, local unit that an institution of higher education could be interested in dealing with.

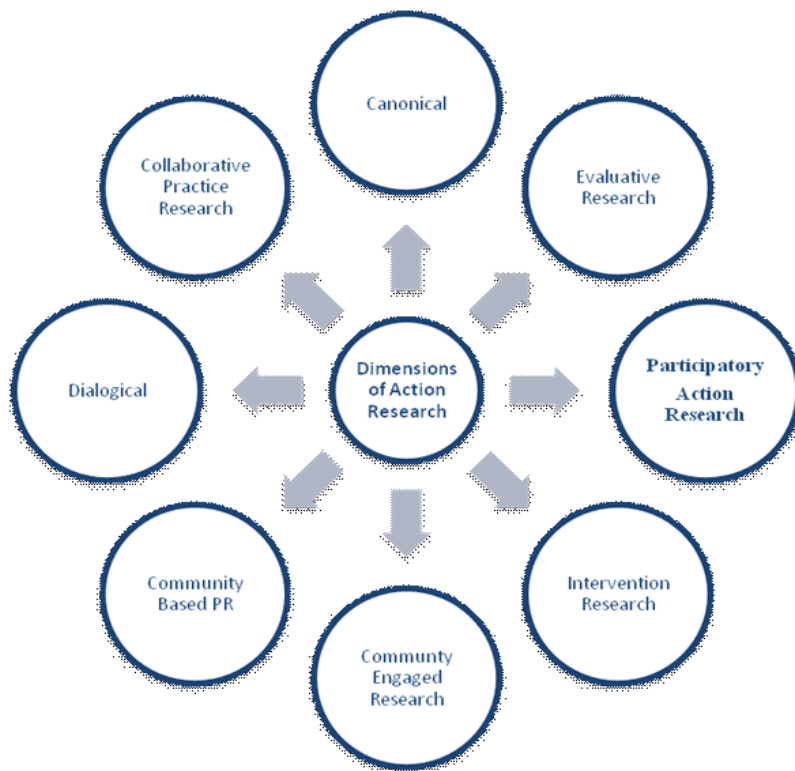
### **Action Research**

PAR is one dimension of Action Research (Checkland & Holwell 1998). Action research is defined in simple terms as 'learning by doing' (O'Brien 1998:2) as a group of people that identify a problem and do something about it. O'Brien identifies other terms used to refer to Action Research, including



participatory research, collaborative research, emancipatory research, action learning and contextual action research. Action research also has many dimensions (Baskerville & Myers 2004; Bender & Carvalho-Malekane 2010; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995) and these are presented in Figure 3. For the purposes of this study, only the generic components of Action Research as well as PAR will be discussed.

**Figure 3:** Dimensions of PAR



**Source:** Author

Action Research originated in the social sciences after World War II in the 1940s and it ‘aims to solve current practical problems while expanding scientific knowledge’ (Baskerville & Myers 2004:329). In action research, the researcher engages the community with a pre-agreed and defined agenda to create organisational change through collaboration. Action research (ibid.) becomes a two-way stage process which is diagnostic and therapeutic. The

diagnostic stage encompasses a collaborative analysis of social situations by researchers and the community. During the therapeutic stage, remedial measures are undertaken and effects of such new changes studied.

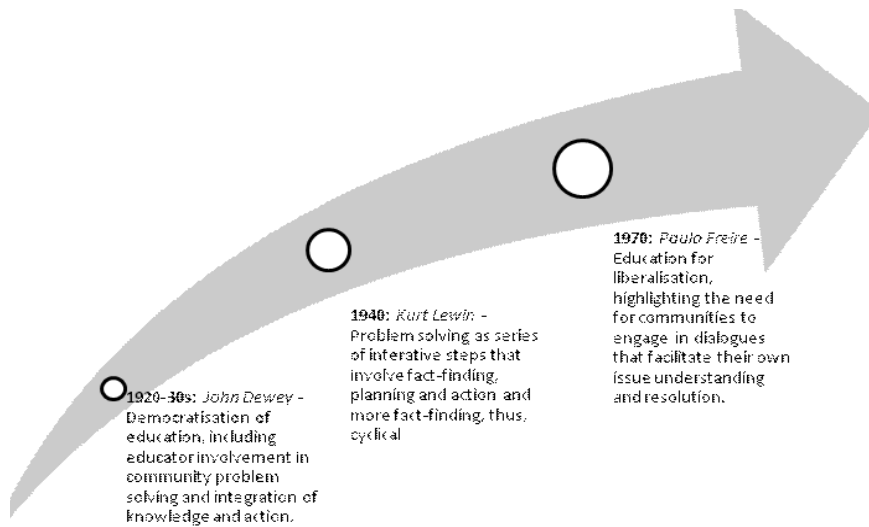
Essentially, Action Research draws from pragmatism, a philosophy that concentrates on interrogation, asking the right questions and retrieving empirical answers to the questions (Baskerville & Myers 2004). This way, researchers in community engagement are able to explain why certain things work or why certain things do not work. From a pragmatist perspective, four basis of argument could be drawn (ibid. 331): (1) all human concepts are defined by their consequences; (2) truth is embodied in practical outcomes; (3) rational thought is interspersed with action – logic of controlled inquiry; and (4) human action is contextualised socially and human conceptualisation is also social reflection (ibid.). Hence if one is to conduct Action Research in order to facilitate community engagement, the purpose of any action needs to be defined beforehand. In addition, there should be a practical action in problem setting that must inform the inquiry and be a social construct. The context of Action Research in a social setting implies that researchers must be participant observers (Baskerville & Myers 2004; Creswell 2003). The community can no longer be passive.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Three major terms are associated with PAR and these are: collaborative, relevance and action research (White et al. 2004). To these key terms other authors add cycles of inquiry (Bacon et al. 2005; Lupele 2003), an aspect that presents PAR as a research, planning and problem-solving tool. Collaboration involves co-inquiry and equitable engagement resulting in positive change (Bailey et al. 2009). Baskerville and Myers (2004) as well as Bacon et al. (2005) acknowledge that Action Research became highly participatory during the 1990s and researchers started applying the methodology regularly (Santelli et al. 1998). Bacon et al. (2005) indicate that PAR was associated specifically with research related to rural and agricultural development in developing countries. Hence, one often reads about other related methodologies like Participatory Rural Appraisal. The authors draw from Biggs's 1989 writings (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995) and come up with a continuum of typologies of participation which they indicate range from contractual (ranked lowest), through consultative, to collaborative and ultimately collegial (ranked highest). Participatory approaches brought closer partnerships and synergies between the researcher and the researched. Within the focus of this article, participatory approaches bring institutions of higher

education close to the communities in which they engage. The historical evolution of participatory research methodologies and PAR is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Historical Evolution of PAR



**Source:** Author, based on Bailey *et al.*, (2009:9).

The participation typologies identified by Biggs (cited in Cornwall & Jewkes 1995:669) are explained as:

- Contractual: people are contracted into the projects of researchers to take part in their enquiries or experiments.
- Consultative: people are asked for their opinions and are consulted by researchers before interventions are made.
- Collaborative: researchers and the community work together on projects designed, initiated and managed by researchers.
- Collegiate: researchers and community work together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process.

In my view, participation does not have single entry and exit points. Hence, it should be viewed on a continuum, ranging from limited participation to full participation. Readers could also choose to use other qualitative variables such as low to high, or passive to active. Bacon *et al.* (2005) found PAR

useful as it meets the twin objectives of research and action for positive community engagement and change. Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) see PAR facilitating the integration of theory and practice. Drawing from the University of Minnesota Task Force on Community Research report, Bailey et al. (2009) present the Continuum of Community Engaged Research with the following aspects:

- *Basic Research Outside of Community Involvement*: e.g. secondary data analysis of reading programme scores.
- *Community-Placed Research*: e.g. one-time community survey of children's reading ability.
- *Basic Community Partnership Research*: tracking children's reading abilities over time in cooperating school.
- *Close Community Partnership Research*: long-term collaborative project to improve reading scores in school.
- *Community-Based Participatory Research*: co-created community intervention to improve community capacity for reading programme at library.
- *Community-Based Participatory Action Research* (highest rank and focus of this work): e.g. co-created research initiative of parents, students, school and university researchers to improve reading in school that results in a policy and practice change.

The Community Engaged Research continuum presented implies that at any one stage, university academics are involved in some form of Community Engaged Research. What differs is the extent to which the academic members are involved. The notion of a continuum presents the research community with challenges associated with a chance to oscillate within the continuum. In action research, university staff involved in the community as researchers have a major role to nurture local leaders to a threshold where they can take responsibility for the process (O'Brien 1998). This means that the researchers can wear many hats during community engagement processes varying from being planner, to leader, catalyser, teacher, listener, observer, synthesiser, facilitator, designer, reporter, etc.

There is evidence of university engagement in community engagement research from Africa and Asia. The Sub-Saharan Africa Participatory Research Network (SSAPAN) promotes the use of PAR in meeting the needs

of people and communities to achieve sustainable development (Global Alliance on Community Engaged Research 2009). Popular knowledge is being developed through university community partnerships in the fields of community development, women issues, poverty alleviation, health, education and literacy, sustainable development and culture. The SSAPAN has been particularly successful in Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania and Chad. In Asia, the society for Participatory Research in Asia has been working on similar initiatives like those from the SSAPAN (ibid.).

Authors have also tried to come up with definitions of what PAR is. However, for the purposes of simplicity and clarity, this article focuses on the identification and description of the key features of the methodology and how it acts as a platform for community engagement from a university perspective. White et al. (2004:3) concur that despite differences in definitions of PAR, convergences exist. Among such key commonalities are included: (1) meaningful consumer involvement in all phases of the research process, (2) power sharing between researchers and consumers, (3) mutual respect for the different provinces of knowledge that the team members have, (4) bidirectional education of researchers and consumers, (5) conversion of results of research into new policy, programmatic, or social initiatives, and (6) the fact that PAR stands in stark contrast to the traditional standard for conducting research in which participants are treated as passive objects of study. Following White et al.'s (2004) observations, four key implementation parameters facilitating the application of PAR are:

- *participant selection and recruitment*: this involves the identification of potential team members, advertising PAR opportunities, gaining entry into a setting, group or network, developing participatory relationships, orienting potential team members, recruiting team members and retaining team members.
- *role and relationship clarification for researchers and participants*: involves defining the scope of PAR, defining member roles, identifying member responsibilities and sharing power.
- *research team education*: encompassing addressing learning needs of the researchers and consumers as well as structuring learning opportunities.
- *management and support*: looks at the determination of management needs, support needs and the assignment of responsibilities and resources.

Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) go further and differentiate participatory from conventional research (Table 1). In their comparison, they focus on answering a series of questions, including: What is the research for? Who is the research for? Whose knowledge counts? They also focus on methodology choice, problem identification, data collection, analysis and interpretation. The comparison in Table 1 does not necessarily mean that researchers utilising PAR cannot integrate and utilise some of the conventional methodologies when applying PAR.

**Table 1:** Comparing Participatory and Conventional Research

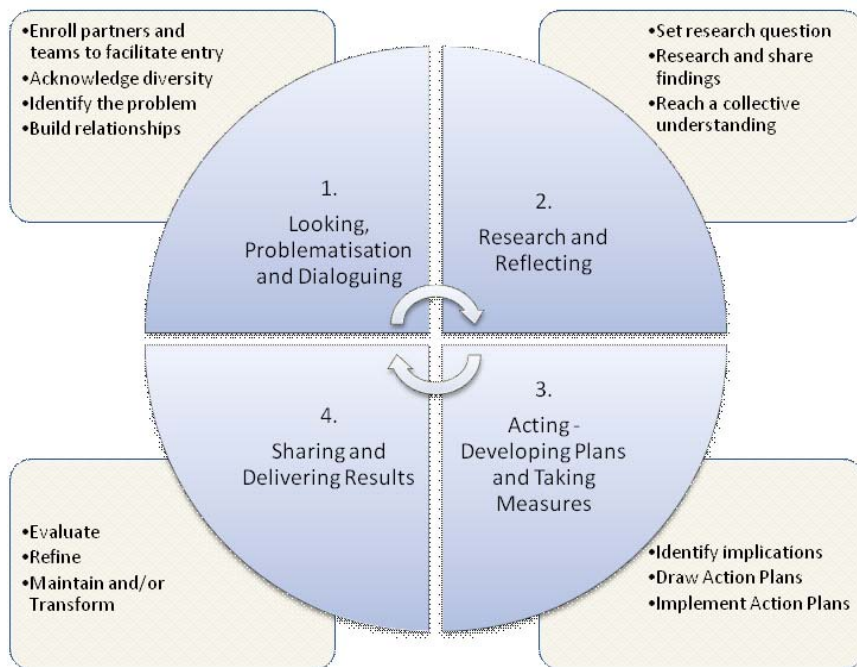
Parameter	Participatory Research	Conventional Research
<b>Upfront questions</b>		
What is the research for?	Action	Understanding with perhaps action later
Who is the research for?	Local people	Institutional, personal and professional interests
Whose knowledge counts?	Local people's	Scientists
Topic choice influenced by?	Local priorities	Funding priorities, institutional agendas, professional interests
<b>Methodological underpinnings</b>		
Methodology chosen for?	Empowerment, mutual learning Who takes part in the stages of the research process?	Disciplinary conversation, 'objectivity' and 'truth'
Problem identification	Local community people	Researcher
Data collection	Local community people	Researcher, enumerator
Interpretation	Local concepts and frameworks	Disciplinary concepts and frameworks
Analysis	Local community people	Researcher
Presentation of findings	Locally accessible and useful	By researcher to other academics or funding body
Action on findings	Integral to the process	Separate and may not happen
Who takes action?	Local community people, with/without external support	External agencies
Who owns the results?	Shared	Researcher
What is emphasised?	Process	Outcomes

**Source:** Modified after Cornwall and Jewkes (1995:1669).

Bacon et al. (2005:2) maintain that PAR is 'a cyclical approach that attempts to involve a wider diversity of stakeholders as active participants in a process of both research activities and efforts to act for positive change'. To this end, the traditional cyclical process of PAR encompasses 'looking' (I would call this problematisation), 'thinking (reflecting)', 'acting' and 'sharing and expanding the network'. Bailey et al. (2009) identify five stages that include: dialogue, discovery, data review and dissemination, developing plans and taking action as well as delivering results. O'Brien (1998) further stipulates four stages that include: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The three sets of authors view PAR as a continuous cyclical process with distinguishable, but networked stages. In the context of this article, I have harmonised the stages from authors under investigation to come up with a 'new' orientation to the PAR cycles (Figure 5). PAR also encompasses what Bai-

ley et al. (2009) term core values, namely: inclusion, integration, appreciation of multiple understandings through dialogue, equity (shared power), transparency, accountability as well as positive change and mutual benefit. Usually, communities and individuals find it difficult to account. Hence, I realise aspects of good governance and good citizenship come into play when dealing with community engagement in higher education. Participants must be fully engaged in all the stages of the cycle for the process to be truly participatory (Wiber *et al.* 2004).

**Figure 5:** PAR’s Continuous Cyclical Nature



**Source:** Author

PAR can be initiated by the community or by the university (Bailey et al. 2009). The community might be seeking to address an issue to foster change, an aspect that compels it to seek university interests, resources and participation. On the other hand, the university might desire to investigate an issue and help the community. This way, the university likewise seeks community interest, resources and participation. Hence, research adds value to the traditional way of doing things (action) in the community whilst action adds value to the traditional research in the university. At the centre of PAR is the



desire by equal partners to continue to widen and deepen engagement, understanding and change.

In as much as PAR has its major advantages, researchers and the community should take note of challenges associated with the presence of the history of lack of trust and low respect within relationships (Bailey *et al.* 2009). Other issues the authors raise include contested community boundaries; fuzzy and unrealistic expectations; miscommunication and inadequate communication; under-developed research skills and network and partnership building; new recruitment processes as participants move in and out and the associated costs, including skill gaps and possibility of collapsing partnerships; and conflict and time commitment. The PAR process is, by its nature, time consuming. In the process, actors and networks may grow weary. To facilitate smoother PAR, Bailey *et al.* (2009) warns that one takes cognisance of power considerations as knowledge is power and it drives change and ethical considerations, including commitments to drive and sustain inclusiveness. The various stages in the PAR model shown in Figure 5, including: Looking and Dialoguing; Problematism, Reflecting and Research; Acting - Developing Plans and Taking Measures; and Sharing and Delivering Results will now be discussed in more depth in the following sections.

### **Looking, Problematism and Dialoguing**

Looking, problematization and dialoguing mark the entry point into the PAR continuous cyclical process. During this stage, the researchers put together a group to be involved in the entire PAR process (Bacon *et al.* 2005). The group of actors is normally embedded in a local organisation or a forum integrating multi-stakeholder organisations and individuals that are interested and affected parties. In this regard, PAR means government bodies; civil society and business should have a voice from the initial stages of the process. Pain and Francis (2003) refer to the group as the 'steering group'. They steer the process and this does not imply that the group hijacks the process.

The initial probing questions during the entry point focus on which actors should be involved in defining the problem and agenda setting. After the formulation of the group, the university and community brainstorm and identify an issue of concern or opportunities for constructive transformation. In the context of higher education in South Africa, the problem is lack of effective community engagement. For Unisa, the current opportunity is that an initiative to work through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework to facilitate community engagement is in place (Steyn 2010). Research



areas could then emerge from the identified problem, including an investigation into how the model being proposed will play out in the community as well as within Unisa. As the problem gets more refined, the group needs to include weaker voices, especially the most vulnerable – women, children and the poor. The group should also visualise the nature of questions that the bigger community and its networks will ask. The concept ‘participation’ should be avoided at all cost if the research will prove otherwise. In the event that the community of interest has some formal institutions in place, these must be utilised as much as possible. However, such local institutions should be audited in terms of verifying power plays and other local social dynamics.

### **Reflect and Research**

Upon continuous reflection, research questions will be conceptualised to address the problem leading the group to initiate relevant research. Issues relating to research designs come to mind (Maxwell 1996) including aspects of validity (Maxwell 1992; Merriam 2001). Reflection also facilitates the sharing of a common vision and destiny with regards to the problem – from the example cited earlier, lack of community engagement within Unisa. If the steering group was to come up with a relevant research question with regards to the identified problem, it will be best to start by revisiting the goals and objectives of community engagement and the roles of universities. One research question could be: How can the MDGs provide a framework for community engagement in universities and, more specifically, Unisa? Many conventional research ethics aspects apply during the reflecting and research stage of the PAR. There must be full disclosure in terms of the purpose and intention of the research. This means that those co-leading the research aspects must be honest and also self-critical (Pain & Francis 2003). In addition, traditional research instruments such as interviews (Arksey & Knight 1999), surveys and case study (Oppenheim 1992) as well as data analyses frameworks like grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) can be utilised. Grounded theory presents a framework that identifies the need for coding, leading to the formation of categories and themes either drawn from the data (in vivo) or from prior established frameworks (in vitro).

The complexity of social issues researched within their social contexts (Lotz-Sisitka, 2002) means that participants in PAR must draw up multi and inter-disciplinary teams. Researchers should also be ready to facilitate learning during the change process by feeding back preliminary findings to the community. This creates a forum for continuous analysis and reflection (Bacon

et al. 2005). Actors and their networks will be embedded in the research findings and start sharing views leading to refinements of particular perceptions as more understanding is sought after.

### **Acting – Developing Plans and Taking Measures**

A distinctive feature of PAR from many conventional methodologies is the commitment by participants to act and to action (Bacon et al. 2005). To this end, information geared towards acting must be generated. Universities should be aware that the community might still decide not to act. Action planning (O'Brien 1998) takes effect and alternative courses of action are considered. The best alternative course of action is selected based on the facts available. Planning involves the allocation of resources including time and money so that delivery of set objectives is met both within budget and on time. Components of project planning and management are also an integral element of the PAR in community engagement.

### **Sharing and Delivering Results**

When sharing, participants in the PAR process 'reflect, assess and summarise the research and change results of their experience' (Bacon et al. 2005:2). Educational visits are usually encouraged, including community to community or university to university exchange visits. Participants need to grow the networks for sustainability purposes. Continued engagement results in re-engagement and redefinition of the problem with the whole cycle starting all over again. This process facilitates a hybrid platform where theory meets practice and possibly results in informed continuous improvement and transformation within the community. Bacon et al. (2005) note that continuing the PAR cycle presents one of the key challenges as this requires long-term commitment from the participating communities. Universities are usually challenged as researchers disengage once they fulfil their personal and professional needs or due to lack of research funds. On the other hand, communities may have other new challenges and priorities, an aspect very common in developing countries with changes in governments and political leadership. The sharing and delivery of results stage might also include evaluation – studying the consequences of actions taken (O'Brien 1998).

### **Conclusion**

This article addressed the challenges in community engagement. The challenges under review are those associated with proper research methodologies that provide platforms for community engagement. The article

identified Participatory Action Research (PAR) as one of the most appropriate sets of methodological orientations that permit true community engagement in institutions of higher education. A model identifying four stages in the continuous cycle of PAR was developed, drawing from models presented by various authors. The four stages were identified as: Stage 1 - Looking and Dialoguing; Stage 2 - Problematisation, Reflecting and Research; Stage 3 - Acting (Developing Plans and Taking Measures); and Stage 4 - Sharing and Delivering Results. These stages were not presented in a linear fashion but in a web-like networked scenario where participants in community engagement move backwards and forth, linking ideas emerging from the stages. The stages were separated to permit simplicity and for analysis reasons. More research needs to be done in terms of methodologies that facilitate easy community engagement. Developing an agreeable set of methodologies could go a long way in this regard. Some questions raised in this article that were not addressed could be a starting point for further research. This is an open call to those interested in this subject.

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