PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) IN PRACTICE
-WASH FOR WOMEN AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) has been a core focus of many development agencies: improving access to clean and safe water and sanitation services and facilities, together with good hygiene practices is of the utmost importance in ending preventable disease and increasing the quality of life for millions of people worldwide. WASH is a basic human right for everyone not just for survival but also to support thriving in life. Increasingly, greater attention has been paid to the social, rather than purely technical and environmental, dimensions of WASH. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs), multi-lateral agencies and governments alike have been bringing to the centre the need to understand how gender and other intersectional identities impact a person’s ability to access safe and sanitary WASH facilities and how WASH interventions can be used as a ‘vehicle’ and entry point towards contributing to strategic gender and inclusive outcomes.

As part of their commitment to WASH and gender equality, the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) created the Water for Women Fund (WFW). This four and half years (since 2018), 110.6 million Australian Dollar investment supports 18 projects across 15 countries in the Asia Pacific region to “support improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asia and the Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects”. This commitment includes making WASH more accessible for women, people with disabilities (PwD) and other marginalised groups. The Fund also has an intention to ‘push the boundaries’ of creating transformative change in some of the poorest regions in the Asia Pacific.

Context
In Indonesia, WFW is partnering with Plan International Australia (PIA) and Yayasan Plan International Indonesia (YPII) to implement the “WASH and Beyond – Transforming Lives in Eastern Indonesia” project in five districts in Eastern Indonesia. The project has four long-term outcomes:

- **End of Project (EOP) Outcome 1 – System strengthening:** Government of Indonesia (GoI) and private sector invest and deliver gender equality and socially inclusive (GESI) sanitation and hygiene (STBM) in two project districts (including implementation and replication).
- **EOP Outcome 2 – WASH access:** 450,000 people (227,000 females, 223,000 males) in 19 sub-districts including marginalised groups (particularly women, girls, PwD) have equitable universal access to, and use, sustainable WASH services
- **EOP Outcome 3 – GESI outcomes/‘beyond WASH’:** Marginalised people including women, girls, PwD are agents of change in claiming their rights in households, communities and public domains.
- **EOP Outcome 4 – Evidence and influence:** Practices of national and international actors are informed by project evidence.

Edge Effect, a social enterprise that supports development and humanitarian agencies to work in genuine partnerships with marginalised individuals and communities, supported the development of, and are leading activities to deliver, the project’s EOP Outcome 3. Much time and investment was spent to set up the tri-party partnership involving YPII, Edge Effect and PIA. This has included developing joint ‘Ways of Working’ protocols to support working together, such as being clear about roles and expectations.

To achieve the project’s EOP Outcome 3, Edge Effect and YPII (with the support of PIA), alongside marginalised groups in the five distinct in Eastern Indonesia, are using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the project’s principle approach to exploring WASH issues in local communities. This approach allows the team to unearth local WASH priorities, and support locally led actions around increasing advocacy and rights to safe, accessible and inclusive public WASH. One of the primary objectives of this project is to increase knowledge of rights, confidence, self-awareness and capacity to act within the groups of women and PwD involved in the PAR. The PAR approach therefore contributes to achieving practical WASH accessibility for marginalised people, whilst at the same time also contributing to shifting power dynamics that are the root causes of entrenched inequalities within the project area.
What is Participatory Action Research (PAR)?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) can be understood by breaking down the three components in its name:

Firstly, it is a form of research. It is a way of trying to understand how the world works and can involve qualitative and quantitative methods.

Secondly, this way of understanding how the world works involves action. Kurt Lewin came up with the idea of action research in the 1950's and said that, "if you truly want to understand something, try to change it" (Lewin 1846). Building on this, there are many definitions of PAR, but a more recent one that may be useful is from Vollman, Anderson and McFarlane (2004) describing PAR as “a philosophical approach to research that recognises the need for persons being studied to participate in the design and conduct all phases (e.g. design, execution, and dissemination) of any research that affects them.” This is the core of action research: investigating the underlying causes of an issue or problem by attempting to bring about change. Action research is an iterative process by which participants identify a problem and seek to change it, then assess the effect (if any) their efforts had. Each opportunity for reflection is an opportunity to build knowledge: when an action doesn’t bring about change, it reveals information about the nature of the problem and generates new ideas for action. Over time, you learn more and more.

Thirdly, the action research needs to be participatory. Not all action research is participatory: a group of experts could get together and do action research about other people. Participatory action research means that the people affected by a problem, or whose lives will change due to the project, are themselves doing the action research. They are learning about the problem, developing ideas of how to change it, learning what does and doesn’t work, and developing new actions to overcome new challenges. In this way participants build their own knowledge about their world and the ways in which they can instigate change and build their capabilities to create change.

PAR is not a specific method or group of methods. PAR can involve qualitative methods such as storytelling, photovoice, mapping, semi-structured interviews, journals, focus groups and more. It can also involve quantitative methods, such as surveys, or it can involve a mix of any of these methods. It is better to think about PAR as a philosophy, as a political decision, or as an attitude. While PAR can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, the way that the ‘WASH and Beyond – Transforming Lives in Eastern Indonesia’ project tri-party partnership uses PAR is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire.

Freire was an education specialist who challenged what he called the ‘banking model of education’ (Freire 1972), or the idea that teaching was like making deposits of information into students. He argued that students need to learn for themselves through experiences rather than being given information without context. Freire expanded this into a social theory, arguing that oppressed and marginalized people cannot be saved by outsiders: “one cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular views of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding” (Freire 1972). For Freire (and the WFW project tri-party partnership), genuine social change comes can only happen when oppressed and marginalized people are themselves at the centre of change efforts.

Development organisations talk a lot about ‘community participation’ in projects. PAR challenges practitioners to be self-critical about how deep that participation really is. Robin McTaggart, a prominent PAR theorist, suggests that a lot of ‘participation’ is shallow, more like ‘involvement’. Robert McTaggart (1997) quotes Rajesh Tandon’s three criteria for participation:

- People’s role in setting the agenda of inquiry
- People’s participation in the data collection and analysis
- People’s control over the use of outcomes and the whole process

When PAR is carried out in a truly participatory manner, significant changes can and do occur. Not only do changes occur in terms of changing the problem that was originally identified, but also in participants’ understanding of their community and their places in it.
Using PAR to transform lives in Eastern Indonesia

It is transformative PAR philosophy, as described above, that the WFW project tri-party partnership employs within the project. In Ruteng (Manggarai district, Nusa Tenggara Timur province) and Sumbawa (Sumbawa district, Nusa Tenggara Barat province), this means creating spaces for, and providing support to, marginalised women and PwD that enables them to recognise and assert their rights and needs for accessible and dignified public WASH. To begin scoping visits and trial PARs were undertaken within the project area to guide future PAR processes including group selection, group discussion of ways of working, PAR in development and cross-linguistic contexts, and support for PAR group activities between PAR sessions. Through this preparatory phase, some PwD in one project district made clear that their preference was to work within a PAR group with people having the same disabilities (rather than a general people with disabilities PAR group) so as to be able to closely relate experiences with each other. This illustrates the importance of the scoping and trial PARs, as this issue would not otherwise have been uncovered. In response to this preference the PAR design was adapted to accommodate for five (rather than two) PAR groups across the two project districts of as indicated in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Number</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sumbawa women’s group</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sumbawa PwD group A: Women and men who are deaf, or who have physical disabilities</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sumbawa PwD group B: Women and men who are blind or have visual impairment</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ruteng women’s group</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ruteng PwD group: Women and men who are blind or have physical disabilities or intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: PAR groups within Plan’s ‘WASH and Beyond – Transforming Lives in Eastern Indonesia’ project

To support the women’s and PwD PAR groups, the project has designed for 6 iterative PAR cycles comprising of: 1) Experiencing (share); 2) Reflection (think); 3) Planning (plan); and 4) Action (act), as shown in Figure 1. The iterative cycles of the four stages allows for PAR group members to collectively identify WASH issues that impact the group the most, and lead their own changes without the WFW project tri-party partners making assumptions and leading them towards particular changes. This process intentionally puts the power in the hands of marginalised people as part of the transformative journey.

Figure 1: The project’s iterative PAR cycle process
Tandon’s (2002) three criteria for participation were used to develop the PAR groups and sessions. Additionally, the project established district-level Leadership and Reference groups including PAR group members, women’s and disabled persons organisations (DPOs), government representatives (village, sub-district and district levels), and community leaders. The Leadership and Reference groups foster collaboration between marginalised people with the wider community and reduce anticipated challenges in advocating for inclusive and safe WASH, including by talking directly to district-level decision-makers who can make decisions that support cohesive communities. Additionally, YPII has offered PAR group members facilitated workshops for learning and understanding WASH more comprehensively.

Setting the agenda of inquiry
In the WFW project to date the five PAR groups of marginalised women and PwD (women and men with disabilities) have worked together to prioritise the WASH issues most relevant for each group. Over the two districts, two main priorities were identified: safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets; and cleaning up waste in local urban villages and waterways.

Urban waste in waterways is a significant challenge in Indonesia. Plastic in particular is very easy to find in daily life in Indonesia: in coffee cups, shopping bags, snack packaging, bottled water. It’s everywhere. For the women’s PAR group in Ruteng, the focus has been on solid waste because women are concerned for their children’s health: when the waste collects in open drains, it ultimately blocks pipes; and when pipes are blocked, water backs up creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes, which brings malaria and other mosquito-borne illnesses; during rainy season, the blocked drains cause flooding, which means contaminated water (and the mosquitoes it attracts) flows into nearby houses; when the pressure of the water builds up, the waste, including the oils and chemicals it contains, is pushed into rice fields, throwing the delicate ecosystem of rice paddies out of sync and killing the fish that both eat malaria-causing mosquitoes and are relied upon as a food resource for women and their families; this results in not only poor rice crops, which increases the cost of rice, but means women need to buy fish rather than simply harvesting the fish from their rice paddies. Plastic waste thus increases the risk and incidence of disease, exacerbates food insecurity, and increases financial precariousness for women in Ruteng.

For the women in Sumbawa, blocked toilets were identified as the first WASH challenge. When asked some probing questions, they shared that sewerage drains are blocked because of solid waste. The women of Sumbawa suggested the reason may be because the waste is not consistently nor hygienically disposed of: household waste is often thrown directly in the local river or stored in rice sacks outside houses that local dogs rip into and then spread throughout the urban villages. The rubbish in the river means that it is no longer considered healthy enough to actively grow vegetable crops in, and fishing in the river is now non-existent. The issue of private household toilet blockages revealed a lack of solid waste collection service and led Sumbawa women to choose to focus on waste as their agenda for the PAR WASH inquiry.

The women’s PAR group in Ruteng observed that plastic waste was the greatest challenge because it is visible and ubiquitous in their community. It was only through guided reflective practice and conversations that the entire story of waste emerged: that it not only was unhygienic and a nuisance, but that it inadvertently increases food insecurity and financial precariousness for women and their families. Furthermore, the process of identifying why waste is so harmful was in itself an opportunity for the PAR group women to share knowledge of their communities in a way that is contextually appropriate. For example, Lita’s (a female PAR participant) analysis was “As we see rubbish everywhere in rivers and waterways, and that it eventually causes illness and flooding, our group decided on this purpose for the PAR”. If, for instance, an expert had come in and told these groups, using diagrams and quantitative studies, that plastic waste and toxins have a negative effect on rice productivity, or fish farming, or vegetable crops in the river, the real-life implications and backward linkages would not be as powerfully identified.
Both of the PwD PAR groups in Sumbawa are focusing on improving public toilet facilities. One group is made up of mostly young adults, who enjoy hanging out at the local park. Dea, one of the PAR participants, reflected “the issue of toilet is a problem that a solution must be sought for, both individually and in groups”. Unfortunately, there are significant barriers to this very important social and community connection: the public toilets located in and around the park are not universally accessible. This means that this cohort of young PwD are often isolated from their friends or they have limited access to the park dependant on very personal circumstances.

**People leading data collection and analysis**

As the outcomes of the PAR prioritisation sessions described above demonstrate, the PAR process necessitates reflection and collaboration within participant groups. This requires and produces data.

As described in the previous section the women PAR group in Sumbawa are focusing on reducing solid waste in the environment - explicitly in relation to the local waterways and the river. They are now actively leading a local action research process and leading some PAR workshop activities. They are involved in data collection, taking photos as documentation and creating a survey, with 60 responses from local community members. Their findings relate to who throws their rubbish in the river, and why. Analysis of data from the surveys, has allowed the women’s PAR group to know who gets solid waste pick-up, and who doesn’t and whether this service is considered affordable or not. Findings show both that the waste collection trucks can’t get into the small alleyways where the people near the river live, and that for some the cost of solid waste collection is unaffordable.

The PwD PAR group in Ruteng, who are also focusing on solid waste, have also undertaken a survey of local knowledge of waste collection services. The group collected 43 surveys from people in 10 urban villages, finding out that there was little understanding from community members about waste collection, if it costs money, if it happens, and if so, how often. This led them to find the relevant local government policies on solid waste collection and they are now starting up a community awareness campaign with the local radio station. Remi, a PAR participant, expressed “I’m very, very happy with the issues we [the PAR group] chose because they are relevant to what is happening in the community. I am proud of the group’s actions taken, even though there are challenges in carrying out the actions”.

The PwD PAR group A in Sumbawa, which identified as their priority an agenda of safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets, has been working to map the location and condition of current public toilets in Sumbawa. They took photos of toilets to highlight the lack of safety, accessibility and inclusiveness. In response, and working together, the group then agreed on a set of universal design principles, and developed a flyer outlining their advocacy goals of safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets. Creation of this flyer drew on contributions from all members of the group: some members took photos, others designed the flyer, and others drafted the words for the flyer. As a group, they then created a petition to hand out to the public. As a strategic move to strengthen the petition’s call for community change, the group also focused on obtaining support from other people and groups that would use accessible toilets in the local parks, including older people and parents with young children.

The PwD group B in Sumbawa started with a community mapping exercise, mapping all the public toilets they use in the local area. They then began talking to GoI officials who spoke of a commitment to accessible toilets in the hospital and health centres. Enthused to hear about this commitment and existing support, the PwD group B developed a basic tool to assess the accessibility of public toilets, which they used while visiting the specific toilets within their self-defined PAR scope. When trying to visit the supposedly accessible toilets in the local hospital which the local officials talked about, to carry out the
assessment the group was told it was only for high fee-paying clients, demonstrating that inclusive practice continues to lag behind official commitments and rhetoric. The group has since created a Facebook page documenting the stories of PwD and the lack of safe, accessible and inclusive toilets. Many people in this particular group are involved in locally led massage clinic run by the blind organisation, Himitras. They are asking their massage clients to ‘like’ and share the Facebook page with their friends, ensuring the page goes beyond the networks of people with disabilities.

The PAR groups are using their lived experiences and local knowledge as opportunities to focus on building increased advocacy skills. For example, the women’s PAR group in Ruteng have taken photos showing the process of waste deposits in Ruteng town, creating resources to utilise in their advocacy campaigns. This increased their ability to be assertive, action their knowledge about rights, and show their capacity to act. The women have used their newly formed confidence, skills and knowledge to already generate some concrete outcomes from the project: building support with local arisans (community prayer groups) and organising monthly clean up days in their Kelurahans (urban villages); successfully advocating to the local government for bins made from old large oil drums to be re-purposed into rubbish cans; and securing commitments from local village leaders to collect rubbish from specific pick up points. The group is now working alongside the local department of the GoI’s environmental agency to think about more systemic changes that can be made.

Between each PAR session there is 8 weeks during which all of the PAR group participants are learning and practicing the skills necessary to hold combined bi-monthly community meetings, taking turns to create agendas, take minutes, facilitate community discussions and learn from each other. Community meetings are underway in both Sumbawa and Ruteng and are regularly attended by local GoI leaders, religious leaders and other interest groups like women leaders, traditional leaders and disability leaders. These in Leadership and Reference group meetings create opportunities for marginalised community members to increase their knowledge about GESI rights, dialogue with GoI decision-makers at a district level, and create advocacy opportunities for changes in GoI decision making, furthering the platform for GoI to adopt safety improvements within city WASH planning and decision-making.

The strength of the PAR processes described above lies in working alongside community members as leaders and lived experience experts. This is exemplified by Hadijah’s (a PAR participant and person with disability) reflection, “I was very happy when deciding on our groups’ goals. I am personally very happy and proud, because people with disabilities were able to decide on what actions to take, as usually people with disabilities are still underestimated”. Facilitating skill development predicated on community input is the driver of change in this project. Building the advocacy skills of the participants - driven by implementing advocacy projects instigated by marginalised communities themselves - captures the success of experiential learning and is supporting increased advocacy by these communities, and the achievement of the rights of marginalised groups for safe, accessible and inclusive WASH.

Snapshot of successes to date

Overall, the ‘WASH and Beyond – Transforming Lives in Eastern Indonesia’ project work is leading to progress against its five EOP outcomes, and some PAR participants could already be said to be ‘agents of change’ (Project EOP Outcome 3).

Significant progress has been made in achieving the anticipated GESI changes. The PAR process has been successful in increasing confidence, assertiveness, knowledge and capacity to act; and women and PWD (people living with different seeing, hearing and physical disabilities) participants are actively involved in evidence gathering, planning, taking actions and reflecting on results. The women and PwD PAR groups have action plans to improve public WASH and have undertaken data collection such as monitoring the accessibility of toilets against a community-generated checklist. Women and PwD groups have met with district government and other community leaders to successfully advocate, for example, for a solid waste collection program. The ability to achieve these changes should not be underestimated. A five-point monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) process is being used to assess PAR facilitation to track participants’ views regarding group cohesion, group purpose, relevance and leadership, pace and community learning. Further, a multi-dimensional ‘Star Tool’ is being used to focus on outcomes for the group, and to track community perceptions of key WASH indicators. To support men, boys and community leaders towards GESI, they have been included in several project related STBM (sanitation and hygiene) GESI trainings/meetings and learning events at sub-district and district levels.
As an example of the results to date, the Ruteng women’s PAR group’s efforts so far has resulted in: 1) The GoI have placed a series of public bins along the roads in the main town; 2) GoI have officially endorsed a monthly urban village clean-up; 3) The Camat (head of sub-district) has made his car available for mobilising this monthly clean-up; and 4) The Camat has formalised (decreed) this women’s group as part of the village STBM team in each of their respective villages.

An unexpected outcome has been three marriages of people that met within the PwD PARs, and one of these couples are currently pregnant. The benefits of bringing people together around a common cause can be love!

Snapshot of challenges and learnings to date
While the project and the PAR process has achieved some notable successes already, a number of challenges have also been experienced and which have produced important and useful learning for the project.

Who clearly defines the identity groups - At the outset none of the people involved in the project, from the WFW project tri-party partnership to local Lurahs (sub-district leaders) who invited participants from their Kelurahan’s (local villages) to participate in the PAR, to the local CBO’s involved, to the community groups themselves, had a shared meaning or perception of ‘marginalised groups’. Who should be invited to participate, who shouldn’t? Who does the inviting? These questions are tough ones the tri-party partnership is still navigating through, and the answers depend on local community contexts, and power. The underlying criteria is informed by a ‘Do No Harm’ agenda. Ultimately, if a person or persons don’t feel like the community groups represent them, they are able to invite new members to address any unbalance, or leave the group. Edge Effect and YPII work collaboratively with the community PAR groups to discuss group dynamics and collective identities to address any issues.

Working with self-identified sub-groups in communities - Within the initial PAR scoping visit, the team connected with many community members and asked questions of potential participants about what they would need to join the project. This created space for communities to insist on specific groups to operate separately within the PAR project. Instead of facilitating two groups made up of both women and people with disabilities, one in each area, the project facilitated five distinct groups, to ensure that all those who wanted to could participate with the boundaries they had set in place. Whilst the project has responded to some of the preferences of these community members it has stretched project workers, field time and project budgets. Once the groups were established, workshops were organised based on times the groups said they could meet. However, once the groups started, there were questions from PAR participants such as why there was variations in duration for each group session (e.g. one day for one group and three half days for another group). There were specific challenges as some groups needed additional time as there are people with a variety of disabilities and access needs, as well as Bahasa Indonesia translators, local Managrai and Sumbawa translators, and Bahasa Indonesia sign language translators. Some groups needed more time and others less, but the issue of divided communities is currently becoming less significant, and the groups are connecting and some are working in conscious solidarity now. Nevertheless, there are ongoing logistics and practicalities that are critical for running PAR well within a project context.

Working within existing systems - At times during the PAR there have been tensions between, and within the dynamics of, local stakeholders, partners and participating members of the community due to existing hierarchies, agendas and power relations. It has sometimes been difficult to navigate through the values and expectations of different groups, and to understand how the project team and PAR facilitators can be accountable to those who have the most to lose and the most to gain from the project— the community members. To ensure that participating women and PwD were not unintentionally further marginalised through the PAR process, existing power dynamics were tackled through a number of strategies. These included the Leadership and Reference groups (e.g. so government and other leaders had a formal role in the PAR process without feeling sidelined); ensuring that workshops remained a safe space (e.g. who is in the room; and regular structured reflections by the facilitation and WW project tri-party teams (e.g. to reflect if power was being genuinely being shifted to the PAR participants).

1 In the scoping visit, the women wanted to have three separate PAR groups for women in three separate Kelurahans (Urban Villages). However, this would be impossible with the scope, resources, time and budget of the project, so the team worked with the women’s groups to find ways the women from the three Kelurahans could work together in one larger group.
The PAR process has also benefited from being situated within a broader WFW project context, with other Project EOP Outcomes contributing to creating a more enabling environment for WASH and GESI within the project districts, particularly at the institutional levels. Good and ongoing working relationships around WASH and GESI between YPII and district governments has facilitated government participation in the reference groups, and women and PwD have been able to meet directly with government representatives.

**Group Sustainability** - The PAR participants, as co-researchers, have led the identification of their research problem, to shape the design, analyse the data, and disseminate the findings. Participants are not passive recipients of the research tools but learn how to lead the data collection and are actively making sense of the data in local and culturally contextual terms. This enables them to re-use the participatory research tools and continue on the research practice once the project is over. Many of the participants have already started to think about how to continue the action research once the project is officially completed. The reasoning for the interest in such sustainability is different for each group and individuals within the groups. For some people, it is the sense of achievement. For others, it is values driven, the desire for further social change and rights-based achievements. For others, it is about continuing the work to achieve longer terms goals of safe, accessible and inclusive public WASH. Some people have been inspired to consider how to use their learnings to pursue other social change goals outside of WASH.

**Acknowledging and navigating power relationships** - To ensure careful evaluation of how the project fosters inclusion, distributes power, and moves toward outcomes that are more just from community perspectives PIA, YPII and Edge Effect, utilising the work of Chevalier & Buckles (2019), developed and employ a cyclic assessment tool. The tools explore five areas of accountability, spanning nine questions that allow community members to assess how well the project is following the PAR philosophy. The challenge of this assessment is, it requires a level of trust. The evaluation helps structure and support the design and facilitation of PAR initiatives. Engaged research, however, cannot be guided by a general formula or science involving strict rules. Rather, it is an art based on judgement, creativity and much practice. Many considerations come into play when applying reasoning and dialogue to pressing matters involving multiple stakeholders and real-life choices.

The key practices that the team have come to rely on to ensure the Participatory Action Research approach is utilised in the best possible way for the women and people with disabilities in the WFW WASH project have been:

- **Creating a safe and inviting environment** - Creating an environment that inspires trust in the convening body, working with the PAR groups to develop safe space agreements, which are updated daily.

- **Eliciting participants views and attentive listening** - Acknowledging the implicit, body language and emotions that people are expressing. This is especially important when working across multiple languages and with different disability groups. Considering local languages, as well as local sign language and braille and culturally appropriate forms of inquiry, learning, planning and interaction techniques.

- **Exploring ways to accommodate differences in language, ability, meaning and symbolism** - Building on local forms of inquiry, learning, planning and interaction that are well established and work well in either literate or non-literate contexts as well as appropriate for both the deaf and blind community members.

- **Building on group and individual differences** - Paying attention to differences in views and knowledge that may affect how people assess the same issues. Forming sub-groups based on age, gender, marital status, religion, type of disability, their Kelurahan (local village), and other relevant indicators.
Clarifying the community members goals at each and every PAR session - Discussing and clarifying what people expect from a process. Use various forms of attentive listening to make sure people’s expectations are clearly understood.

Reflecting on process with the PAR community and within the logistics and facilitation team - Welcoming questions or comments about the process being used in a discussion. State what needs to change in a positive way and adjust when possible. When unsure on how to proceed, share doubts with the PAR group and ask for help.

Encouraging creative expression - Using humour, games, physical movement, ice-breakers and other forms of creative expression to build awareness, energise the group and connect to emotions. This helps facilitate teamwork, release tension and ground learning in real-life settings.

Choosing the right technology and facilitation techniques, and changing them collaboratively with input with the PAR groups when they don’t work - Determining what facilitation techniques and technology should be used and how to gather and analyse information with the support of visual or physical or tactile tools (especially considering the PwD in the project) that help understand and discuss patterns emerging from the findings. Deciding whether to use drawings, objects, flip charts, note taking or floor democracy to facilitate data collection and analysis. Making a list of the supplies and equipment needed for each discussion (such as cards, post-its, masking tape, scissors, markers of different colours, drawing paper, flip charts and stands for all groups, a laptop computer and video projector, etc.).

Being flexible, adapting and changing according to the group’s needs - Being able to change plans and adjust or replace a tool with a different one along the way. Having a clear understanding of where the group wants to go with an inquiry helps manage the change. Varying the methods and the kinds of activities and facilitation techniques used, if only to avoid fatigue.

Managing time - Planning enough time to go through all the steps of a PAR tool, with breaks during the process as needed. The group may decide at any time to stop the exercise, find more information about the questions being raised and complete the exercise later. Saving time by dividing the group into smaller groups, and then asking each one to complete one part of the assessment (e.g. each group can assess a different option or use a different criterion to rate the same set of options). This also helps navigate internal group power dynamics.

Adjusting the level of participation in reference to Arnstein’s (1969), A Ladder of Citizen Participation - Planning realistic ways to help people participate in an inquiry process, this includes having multiple facilitators working with different groups with different needs, and having several tools aimed at achieving the same outcomes to adjust level or skills, abilities and time.

**Recommendations**

The ‘WASH and Beyond – Transforming Lives in Eastern Indonesia’ project has a number of recommendations to share with the development sector based on the successes and learnings to date from utilising the PAR process:

Engage in more consistent and more public practices of self-reflexivity about the risks, challenges, and failures of starting and maintaining a Participatory Action Research project.

A key challenge in PAR, and a constant learning, lies in knowing how to select and adapt tools and facilitate activities for collaborative inquiry and action. This is a process design. Process design is a flexible systems approach to help select, combine and adapt tools for participatory inquiry and action. It involves making plans at the right time, and the appropriate level of detail, adjusting them to unforeseen events and new information obtained along the way. This requires a consistent level of self-reflexivity to navigate through the risks, challenges, failures and next steps within each day of the in-field PAR project.

The concept of reflexivity challenges the assumption that there can be a privileged position where the external researcher/s can study social reality objectively, that is, independent from it through value-free inquiry, and instead requires a collaborative agreement of how to proceed considering a Do No Harm approach. A daily team, and at least bi-monthly partnership self-reflexivity practice should be built into the budget and time planning for each project.
Building Relationships: Moving towards more transformative ways of working with marginalised people.

Brokering relationships between groups that usually have no connection with each other, enables the flow of ideas, information, activities and relationships within and between the individual groups and across the broader community. This is especially important when working between specific marginalised groups within the broader community and other stakeholders, such as CBO’s and GoI departments, as they may have little or no physical or cognitive access to each other and little basis for trust in each other. Stakeholder engagement and information sharing is integral to the success of this project. Building Relationships between disconnected stakeholders is an integral part of community development aspect of PAR and should form part of the planning process.

Leverage transdisciplinary planning theories, methods, and tools, seek out multiple epistemological standpoints and engage in systems thinking.

A key operational element underlying the PAR project is the use of ‘systems thinking’ as a set of tools for integration. PAR, informed by both systems theory and expertise in facilitating engagement and social learning, can help ground the PAR project theoretically and support its ongoing development. PAR is iterative and adaptive, which is necessary to deal with complexity in practice. The primary theories within this project used to inform the systems thinking and facilitation in practice are:

1. Feminist principles: In the tradition of feminist research, this project has the dual objectives of seeking new knowledge and, in the longer term, contributing to social change.
2. Rights-based research: At the core of the methodology is the belief that the human rights of participants must be respected during the research process. Participants must have sufficient information to decide whether or not they wish to participate, and must be able to choose not to participate or to withdraw should they wish to do so.
3. Participatory research principles: recognises that people have expert knowledge and deep insight into their own lives and communities.

To ensure that the appropriate theories are understood, and implemented with appropriate methods and tools, it is important to spent a large amount of time with the partners, and core team to workshop the transdisciplinary planning theories, methods and tools, and to practice systems thinking before you start the actual PAR process. The theories can remain conceptual unless significant effort is made to explore how they can be implemented in PAR approaches, and this requires a specific planning and capacity building phase for the core PAR team.

Engage in inclusive and consistent dialogue about risk assessment, concerns, and contextual issues with all stakeholders.

PAR can be characterised as a reaction to - and rejection of - traditional, hierarchical Western models of academic research standards, and formalised expertise. This rejection of standard approaches is shared by many community engagement practitioners and emerges in part from the recognition that conventional teaching and research approaches tend to see others as objects of study and recipients of benevolent aid rather than as partners. PAR itself is being used as an alternative to traditional models for research and action focused local WASH problems involving emancipatory educational, cultural, and political processes. Aligned with community-engaged processes, PAR practitioners must consider how their work involves problem-focused and context-sensitive. Such practices, however, increase the risks, challenges, and barriers of conducting ethical research, requiring far more time, outreach, and additional training. To reduce the risks, inclusive and constant dialogue with country partners and participants is integral, developing relevant activities for participants to engage in their own risk assessments, and to create a culture within the PAR project to participate in inclusive and consistent dialogue, especially around consensus decision making.

Ensure careful evaluation of how the project fosters inclusion, distributes power, and moves toward outcomes that are more just from all stakeholder perspectives.

Advocating for procedural and institutional change for safe, accessible and inclusive public WASH means that PAR opens opportunities for building relationships across difference, shifting exclusionary, supposedly objective, and value-neutral research practices and policies. This requires bringing people-based and evidence-based thinking together in support of meaningful action-learning processes for the good of all. Within the PAR project, power itself is an elusive concept about which there has been considerable discussion. Foucault's position is particularly relevant to PAR – that power is something that results from the interactions between people, from the practices of institutions, and from the exercise of
different forms of knowledge (Foucault 1988). The WFW project PAR facilitation team worked extensively with the PAR groups to distribute both visible and invisible forms of power between the facilitation team and the PAR groups, and in external stakeholder engagement outside of the PAR workshops. This included considering how physical space is used (i.e. sitting in a circle); how the facilitation team interacts with the groups and within the space (i.e. not sitting together in a block, but dispersed within the group); and PAR participants obtaining physical letters with logos to indicate their involvement in the project and legitimacy of collecting data.

References


Mc Taggart, r. (ed) [1997] Participatory action research: international contexts and consequences. Albany” State University of New York Press.


About Plan International

We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it’s girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children’s rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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