



# Participatory Action Research

## What is participatory action research?

- Working with people to improve their lives
- Helping them to think about what they want or need, and to explore the best ways of achieving it
- Pulling out learning from the experience, so that it can be used successfully by others

The success of any community project can be measured in terms of the engagement, sustained involvement and empowerment of people in the project target group. The Participatory Action Research approach developed for the Mentro Allan programme provides a simple model of project development and evaluation based on participant involvement.

Participatory Action Research is cyclical. Participants plan action on some issue that concerns them, the action is carried out, and then participants reflect on how it went, so that they can understand what did and didn't work, and why, and use that learning to inform the next round of action. In this way the project is developed through feedback from the people involved.

Project staff provide opportunities for this process of planning and reflection at facilitated events, taking place as suits the type of action, for example at the end of a series of activities, after an important event, or at regular intervals in an ongoing process. They also listen to informal feedback.



## Using Participatory methods:

### Planning a participatory event

- Make sure that the event takes place in a location and at a time that your target participants can easily attend and will feel comfortable with.
- Make sure you have a clear question or issue as your starting point.
- Only offer what you can deliver. Don't get people all fired up discussing something that can never happen.
- Make the event a fun occasion, with food and social time: to begin with participants won't know what they'll gain from this process, so if you want them there, you need to offer them clear benefits. Also, good social experiences are a strong reason for people to commit to involvement in a project
- Who's going to facilitate the event, who will take notes?
- What equipment will you need? For example, flipchart, pens, contact lists, name badges etc



### Running a participatory event

- Give someone the job of welcoming everyone as they arrive, and letting them know what to expect (refreshments, agenda, gather contact details, starting time, find yourself a seat etc)
- Sit people in a circle as far as possible – this gives the sense that everyone in the event is equally valued, and encourages equal participation
- Make the planning process is clear to all participants and encourage community ownership of the project: explain what the meeting is for, how decisions will be carried out, and the timetable.

- Everyone introduces themselves: even if only one person in the meeting is new, or doesn't know people, it's important that they don't feel an outsider.
- Include some extra, positive, relevant information for people to give in introductions, for example, something you enjoy about the outdoors, a fun activity with people etc – if what you're asking for is light and easy it won't worry people but will raise the tone of the meeting and help people feel relaxed with each other
- If you think people in the group will find this kind of introduction makes them anxious, put them in pairs first to try it with one other person.
- Explain to participants that their involvement is central to the success of the project, they're the experts, and ask them for their help
- Make opportunities for pairs and small group work: most people think and talk more freely in a small group, and ideas can be brought back to the main group afterwards
- Where possible, write notes on a flipchart, so everyone can see them
- Vary the techniques you use to gather information, to keep people interested: lists on flipchart, gather ideas on post-its, mapping, dot voting, small group presentations etc
- Keep to advertised times
- Don't ignore the social element in favour of business: people need to feel comfortable
- Aim to come out of the session with clear information about what participants would like to see happen, how best to set up activities and to overcome the barriers to making things work well
- Feed them after the business – as a general rule, people will concentrate on getting the business done to get to the promised lunch

### Sample Session plan:

- Welcome
- Introductions: everyone says name and bit of friendly light info, facilitator says what's going to happen
- Current situation (if action has already taken place, a round up, if not, an intro to the project aims and resources)
- Introduce Research question: as precise as possible
- Participatory exercises to explore research question; gather ideas for action and prioritise them. For example: what would you like to see happen about this issue, what's going well, what needs to change, what are the barriers to change and how can they be overcome, what are the first steps.
- Round up what action's been agreed on and who's doing what, next meeting date
- Evaluation: everyone has a chance to feedback on how the meeting went, what's been missed

### The quality of action research improves if....

- People are involved in planning from the start, and their expertise is respected
- Less action is explored more deeply (this is also likely to lead to more sustainable outcomes). So make sure you've got the right question!
- The focus is on people and process rather than a programme of activities
- Activities are well planned and respond to wishes
- There are opportunities for reflection, evaluation and celebration of achievement in appropriate social settings
- People at all levels of the research (community, development workers, management) also use the AR methods to draw out their own learning

If you'd like more information about this model, the **Mentor Allan Evaluation Guidance** document is available: [www.mentoallan.co.uk](http://www.mentoallan.co.uk)

