

Building a shared approach to action research

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Acknowledgements

The compilation of this report was a collaborative effort. It draws on the notes prepared by Rosebella Apollo during the ACRC workshop held in Nairobi, in November 2022. It also draws on the summaries and reflections of each of the breakout group sessions which informed the synthesis of the tables and checklists presented in the report.

Following the workshop, Irene held individual conversations with each of the workshop presenters who had given PowerPoint summaries and community researchers who shared their lived experiences orally at the workshop. These conversations enriched the process of teasing out the key lessons and context specific considerations that shaped the design and implementation of action research. Consequently, each example illustrates from different perspectives one of the key characteristics of action research as an iterative process. Contributors reviewed their draft text and Shuaib Lwasa supported with the final editing of the report.

Introduction

Action research seeks to catalyse urban transformation and urban reforms, and to enhance service delivery and equitable local governance systems. The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) programme is now at a stage where several cities will start implementing action research projects. It is envisioned that these action research projects – based on co-design and co-production – will build new knowledge and test innovative solutions, to address critical complex challenges in Africa cities.

This briefing explores our shared understanding of action research, arising out of discussions from an ACRC workshop of community representatives, academic researchers and practitioners, which was held in Nairobi in November 2022. The purpose of the workshop was to bring together academic and community researchers from across the ACRC network to reflect on their own experiences of conducting action research and, in doing so, to:

- Develop a good understanding of what action research is (and is not).
- Reflect on past action research projects – understanding what worked, how it worked and what did not work – so that we can use these experiences to shape ACRC action research methodology.
- Develop methodological approaches rooted in decoloniality, to shape a shared approach to action research in ACRC cities during the implementation phase.

Drawing on experiences from across the consortium, we hope this briefing is a useful guide to undertaking effective participatory action research projects for both researchers and community organisations.

The briefing is structured in three parts. The first part outlines the key principles and characteristics that distinguish action research from traditional research. This is followed by a set of examples, presented during the workshop, and the salient points of discussion arising out of each presentation. The third section sets out the discussions around co-production, as well as challenges and solutions in conducting action research.

1. What is action research (and what is it not)?

In contrast to traditional research approaches, participatory action research places the community at the centre of the research process. This means they are involved in identifying and prioritising the problem, formulating research questions, and analysing the findings. This approach provides a range of options for solutions and enables participants to effect change in ways that are meaningful to their communities. Often referred to as co-creation, co-design or co-production, all terms underscore that this is a participatory process.

The table below presents various responses from the workshop group discussion around this question.

Action research is not...	Action research is ...
Top down or prescriptive.	Based on the premise that all stakeholders whose lives are affected by the problem under study are actively involved in the process.
A linear process, one-sided, designed by external experts who 'parachute' in and out.	An iterative process, involving communities, various interest groups and professionals in the collaborative design of the research questions, data collection and analysis.
Passive or a case study (a case study may focus on observing and analysing, but may not involve the 'subjects' of the enquiry).	Conducted to address a particular problem, and provides an actionable pathway to tackle the problem, testing various pathways for solutions.
Research for action versus action research.	Focused simultaneously on research and action.

2. Action research processes and experiences

This section summarises experiences of action research shared by consortium members, highlighting methods and approaches used, along with common challenges and lessons learned. They illustrate points that need to be considered in planning, co-designing and co-producing knowledge, as well as providing guidance on how to avoid unintended consequences.

> Ensuring research is not extractive and managing community expectations

Accra, Ghana

*The following example is an urban water project in Accra. Shared by **Farouk Braima** (People's Dialogue Ghana, an SDI support NGO), it highlights the critical importance of managing community expectations.*

Since 2003, People's Dialogue Ghana (PDG), in partnership with the Ghana Homeless People's Federation, has pioneered community-based water and sanitation solutions. In 2006, academics from the University of Ghana and international researchers carried out a study on the experiences of community water provision. Their approach involved extensive discussions and interviews with community representatives, and a detailed review of PDG information and data drawn from the community enumeration exercises.

PDG played a convening role in identifying and facilitating an entry point to three communities for the research team, which was comprised of academic and community researchers. The community took the lead in the participatory data collection work, using diverse methods that enabled "unheard community voices to be heard". However, the project did not move beyond research to action.

Although the primary focus of enquiry revolved around water provision, it was marked by different motivations. The academic interest was in gathering knowledge to publish papers, while the community was interested in practical solutions that would improve the conditions for residents. In practice, the project outcome provided new knowledge, but not water. Key constraints encountered included the funder's predefined and unrealistic timeline, and their concern with meeting deadlines and budget spend, with less consideration of what was happening on the ground.

From a community perspective, research can be dehumanising when researchers do not take the time to create open, honest and trust-based relationships. Building authentic relationships takes time and commitment, which may not fall neatly within the time framework of a research grant. This highlights the need to involve the community in the full project decisionmaking cycle – from defining the scope of the research enquiry and timeline, to agreeing on the expected outcome.

It is crucial to recognise from the outset that motivations of stakeholders may differ; academics may engage in short-term transactional relationships with communities in order to achieve their publication goals, at the expense of producing new knowledge or developing actions to address the priority problem that the communities wish to solve. Further, early in the process, it is advisable for stakeholders to discuss what assets and resources already exist locally within the communities, which can be drawn upon in taking action and preparing solutions. This experience points to a need to build iterative reflection and feedback loops throughout the duration of the project cycle. Managing expectations and being clear from the outset about the end goal are vital, and early negotiations are essential if expectations are misaligned.

> **Co-designing participatory action research – a transdisciplinary approach**

South Africa

*The following example, shared by **Kweku Koranteng** (ICLEI Africa), summarises his experience of transdisciplinary approaches in co-designing action research. It illustrates the importance of getting the right balance between technical experts and community researchers, particularly in cases where the introduction of a new technology is being tested as part of the action research and potential solutions to community problems.*

IShack is a South African social enterprise that provides off-grid solar electricity to low-income informal settlement residents who do not have grid electrification. The creation of IShack was an outcome of action research led by Stellenbosch University, which sought to produce new knowledge on incremental service delivery to informal settlement households.

In South Africa, a monthly subsidy for free electricity was available to households connected to the grid. However, residents in informal settlements that were unrecognised by the authorities did not enjoy the benefits of the subsidy. The main

research question was: “what alternative services could be provided while informal dwellers had to wait?”. The project objective was to co-design an energy solution that aimed to construct mini grids. Through training, capacity development and knowledge transfer, the expected outcome was to build community management capabilities to enable settlement residents to administer their own energy supply. The project also included a policy-influencing component, involving lobbying government to extend the subsidy that was already in place to other underserved groups. In addition, it sought to provide new evidence that would inform urban policy on incremental upgrading in informal settlements.

The primary interest of the project funder, the World Bank, was to test and demonstrate a viable and financially sustainable model for the provision of energy services. As a result, the institutional agenda influenced the process; a key limiting factor was the preestablished short timeframe. Technical and scientific experts also held the yardstick of what was considered development or progress, which was disconnected from community knowledge and realities.

Discussing this example, workshop participants concluded that:

- Researchers and government agencies can mistakenly assume that there is scant community knowledge on technical issues of what works and what does not. Consequently, they fail to consider the accumulated knowledge of community approaches and solutions as a starting point for analysis and preferred approaches to existing problems.
- For participatory action research to be effective, rather than starting from scratch, researchers must recognise, understand and build on existing local knowledge.
- From a transdisciplinary perspective, researchers must be prepared to navigate between community knowledge and scientific knowledge.
- In framing research and options for solutions, humility on the part of researchers is imperative – sometimes referred to as a process of “de-schooling of perceived ideas and assumptions and reschooling”. In this case, the intention of the action research was to test off-grid energy provision, and its potential for replication. However, replication did not happen. Several lessons can be drawn from this.
- Action research is an iterative process. It involves planning, action and analysis of outcome, followed by a fresh round of enquiry, posing new research questions and informing the testing of alternative options on deficiencies, shortcomings or gaps, either in knowledge or in the solutions that are detected.
- Where new technology is being tested, as in this case, experts from several disciplines need to work collaboratively with different community groups to produce knowledge on the suitability and affordability of the technical solutions, and thoroughly assess the degree to which end users accept the solution. Action research stages of planning, testing and analysis need to build in processes and spaces to enable the community to scrutinise the usefulness of the solution proposed.

> Community-led action research to inform and enable solutions

Harare, Zimbabwe

*This example illustrates how community-led research provided valuable data to plot owners in Harare, Zimbabwe. Shared by **Beth Chitekwe-Biti** (Slum/Shack Dwellers International), it explores how plot owners were able to present evidence to local authorities, resulting in practical water and sanitation solutions and triggering changes in local planning regulations.*

The Zimbabwe Homeless Peoples Federation carried out their own action research to document who had water, and who did not in particular settlements. This involved mapping water points and sanitation across the settlement to assess the quality and conditions of the service.

The participatory research findings showed that in communities that were connected to public water facilities, the conditions were highly deficient. This was due to two reasons: lack of maintenance and weak community ownership, since these were publicly owned services. In contrast, for communities with no public services, the city by-laws in Harare are such that residents are only permitted to occupy plots if services are installed, despite the incapacity of the city authorities to service these areas. Using the research findings, conversations were held with the authorities around both the public services and non-serviced plots.

Two potential solutions were proposed and agreed by the authorities: the decommissioning of existing public toilets and the introduction of a levy across the city to fund the upgrade of city public sanitation facilities. The second solution looked at alternatives for cases where the city authorities were unable to supply water and sanitation. In this case, the city approved the use of waterless toilets and the perforation of boreholes providing a water supply. Consequently, plot owners were able to occupy their plots.

This example highlights several recurring themes discussed throughout the workshop:

- Capabilities exist in communities to generate and analyse data. “Communities are research centres, where capacity building emerges from learning by doing.”
- Community-owned data can be used to address and modify rigid city policies through negotiation – a practical, incremental and doable solution, at relatively low cost, within the reach of plot owners, is possible.
- Action research addressed a particular problem and provided an actionable and implementable solution.

> Conducting participatory action research with highly vulnerable groups

Nairobi, Kenya

*This experience highlights the challenges of conducting action research with people who have experienced severe trauma and the safeguarding issues that need to be considered, both for the researched and the researcher. Shared by **Wangui Kimari** (now at the American University, Kenya), it also illustrates the research methods selected to reach and engage highly vulnerable groups living with trauma.*

Participatory action research, conducted by the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC) with residents from the Mathare community, documented localised cases of police killings and their impact on the community. The research sought to detect and record: who in the community was at greatest risk of being killed by the police, how the community can seek justice and what the findings indicate around the criminalisation of poverty. The researchers initiated their enquiries using word of mouth and posters to contact family members of victims, expressing their interest in holding conversations at a moment when everyone seemed to have a story of family loss. The core research question was: “Why have police killings become normalised?”

The participatory action research began slowly and built up incrementally, gathering an inventory of personal stories and incidents over several years between 2014 and 2017. The researchers used various ways to detect cases, including asking family members, visiting areas where killings had taken place and walking through the neighbourhood, raising awareness among residents.

Chronicling the cases demanded attentive listening skills, empathy and sensitivity from the researchers, given the risk of re-triggering the trauma experienced by families of victims and/or survivors of police brutality. In this context, “everyone became a researcher” and “the victim or survivor was not a statistic”.

The researchers submitted the compendium of personal stories to the authorities and used it to compile a report on the normalisation of police killings, which forms part of a larger continuum of structural violence in Nairobi. Quantitative data was collated from daily newspaper reports, and made more powerful by the qualitative lived experiences of police brutality that were also gathered. Personal diaries increased visibility, moving beyond statistics and highlighting how sinister policing was part of larger social justice issues. The research findings provided compelling evidence that most killings by police occur in situations where the only one under threat is the alleged crime suspect.

The work was cited by human rights organisations, provided evidence to support the emergence of a national campaign against extrajudicial killings and caught the attention of political leaders. It also catalysed the establishment of a family support network for legal advice and trauma counselling services. However, using the research findings to seek justice for victims and their families and enact police reform has faced significant challenges. There remains a lack of resources to sustain cases throughout the highly bureaucratic legal system, and inertia on the part of the state to reform the police system.

Safeguarding and unintended consequences

Discussing this experience, workshop participants highlighted some key issues in safeguarding. Safeguarding researchers and communities throughout the action research process is vital. In undertaking research on sensitive, high-risk issues, researchers must first consider the degree to which the research and the findings may trigger unintended consequences. In the case example presented, the MSJC is embedded within the communities that were being researched. As such, the action research process posed considerable risk to researchers and victims' families, with the threat of police retribution to shut down any work that would expose police violations. In addition, researchers must be mindful and sensitive in formulating research questions, to avoid retriggering trauma and/or exacerbating stigma.

In documenting experiences, researchers themselves may also experience trauma. It is therefore necessary to create safe spaces to talk about this and include appropriate interventions. Action research teams working on sensitive issues often include a mix of individuals with lived experience, together with professionals with expertise in managing trauma. For example, action research focused on gender-based violence or youth gang violence will often include survivors that have set up advisory services or work in support organisations, together with providers with expertise in trauma therapy. The MSJC research also highlights the critical importance of having robust safeguarding policies and practices in place prior to undertaking research work.

Key takeaways for researchers from the discussion on safeguarding include:

- Adopt “do no harm” as the overarching principle.
- In framing the research lines of enquiry, consider potential risk of direct and indirect harm to communities and researchers.
- Exercise sensitivity around what questions to ask and how to ask them. Select research methods and tools that have safeguarding concerns first and foremost in mind – such as journalling, drawing and sharing stories – are less extractive and can be therapeutic.
- Managing vulnerability and power dynamics is crucial.
- Hold regular reflections and invite feedback from participants to detect emerging risks or potential ethical issues early.
- Agree upon parameters for access to, protection and storage of sensitive research at the planning stage.

The risk of unintended consequences can be illustrated by experiences in Mukuru, Nairobi, where research – undertaken by academics with Muungano wa Wanavijiji (the Kenyan SDI Federation) and their support NGOs – revealed high levels of soil pollution. While the academics were keen to publish their findings, the Muungano Alliance wanted to delay because they feared that the authorities might respond by evicting residents from the land. They wanted to wait and mobilise residents so that they could negotiate for increased tenure security.

> Collaborating across sectors to improve service delivery and drive policy change

Mvurwi Town, Zimbabwe

*This experience, shared by **Selina Pasirayi** (University of Harare), illustrates the importance of bringing together a range of stakeholders with different specialisms – each providing a spectrum of expertise, technical and community knowledge. Working collaboratively and informed by the findings of action research, a multidimensional project solution and WASH intervention was enabled, which responded to residents' immediate needs and influenced national policy.*

The provision of water and sanitation in Zimbabwe faces many challenges associated with capacity, behaviours and a lack of investment in the sector over several decades. A small towns WASH project was launched in Mvurwi Town in partnership with the town council, as part of a larger programme in 14 towns. The aim was to contribute to a reduced burden of diarrhoeal diseases and improved productivity amongst the more than 10,000 people living in Mvurwi Town.

ActionAid Zimbabwe coordinated participatory action research to inform and design the project intervention, with support from UNICEF. Engagement and participation of key actors was achieved by setting up a project accountability team (PAT) comprised of interested parties. The PAT was led by the district administrator, council town clerk and council chairperson (elected residents' representative). Other key partners included the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Zimbabwe National Water Authority, community health clubs, residents' associations representatives and NGOs involved in the WASH sector. The PAT met periodically (initially monthly, then quarterly) to design the project, address challenges, and chart and review the project direction.

The action research began with data collection to create a baseline that provided evidence to track periodic disease surveillance and inform the project intervention – the rehabilitation of water and sewerage infrastructure. Community health clubs working closely with the local clinics and Ministry of Health monitored the prevalence of diarrhoeal diseases, informing the Ministry of Health of hotspots, which were targeted for WASH messaging.

ActionAid worked on strengthening grassroots organising, by setting up and/or revitalising community health clubs and the Mvurwi residents' associations. Members were encouraged to join savings and lending clubs (ISALs) to boost their incomes and livelihoods, since the action research findings showed weak capacity of some residents to pay their council rates, due to poverty and unreliable sources of income. In addition, as research findings highlighted complaints about poor customer care from the council, the project invested in training for local authority officials. Council employees also availed a new billing software to tackle residents' complaints about inaccurate and inefficient billing practices.

UNICEF provided technical assistance, engaging an engineering firm to repair and rehabilitate the water and sewer reticulation system in Mvurwi, and facilitated training

for communities and Zimbabwe National Water Authority/town council engineers on use and maintenance of the rehabilitated infrastructure. Mvurwi town was one of 14 towns that used the evidence-based research as a basis to advocate for regulatory change at national and local levels through the National WASH Forum. Action research findings provided inputs into the National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy.

Stakeholder engagement and inclusivity – who is involved, who participates and who leads?

A key area of reflection emerging from the Mvurwi Town example is around stakeholder engagement and designing action research. Common questions include: who to include and/or exclude in an inclusive approach? What steps can researchers take to ensure breadth of voice, with gendered and minority representation? How can rigidity in the way different stakeholders want to do things be managed?

In setting up the PAT in this case example, it was crucial to be aware of which players hold what power and who might be included or excluded, when and why. Including all critical voices was imperative to recognising formal and informal powerholders, as well as ongoing simmering tensions that might exist between different interest groups, particularly in a challenging political context, in which the politics of water management could interfere with the project. At the outset, city and national water management bodies were not on talking terms. So there was a need to find ways of successfully managing expectations. Failure to do so may negatively affect the project's feasibility.

The workshop discussions on engagement and inclusivity concluded that:

- Managing politics and power play in projects is crucial and calls for a delicate balance.
- Mapping stakeholders based on interests, influence and power, and clustering groups with shared issues, can enhance broader engagement.
- Sequencing involvement of various stakeholders over the course of research and action can build linkages and nurture collaboration.
- Identifying local champions can help to push the work forward.
- Leadership does not necessarily rest with one individual but in teams, whereby leadership is fluid and transitional, enhancing greater legitimacy and consensus.
- Coordinating transparently and with integrity to gain trust is critical to navigate relationships.
- Good communication is key.

> Co-designing research questions – a cautionary tale

Nairobi, Kenya

*This example, shared by **Mary Mutinda** and Federation (Muungano wa Wanavijiji) members **Eva Muchiri, Nancy Njoki Wairimu, Rashid Mutua** and **Dorice Bosibiri**, concerns research carried out in Mukuru, Nairobi. It illustrates the importance of co-designing research questions with communities.*

This is a key principle, which distinguishes action research from traditional research methodologies, such as surveys and key informant interviews. Further, it demonstrates how community profile data built compelling evidence that provided the impetus for pushing forward a first-of-its-kind and radical intervention, by harnessing urban planning policies that were on the statute books but lay dormant. It also provides a cautionary tale that action researchers must embrace when crafting research questions.

The Muungano Federation and Akiba Mashinani Trust (AMT) – the Federation’s financial facility – were undertaking an analysis for planning different housing options in Mukuru, a large informal settlement. Funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), researchers at Strathmore University designed a housing survey to establish the affordability of different housing solutions for low-income residents, analysing the degree to which the population might be willing and able to pay a mortgage. Although it appeared that the households were low-income at the outset, the data showed that, compared to residents in formal settlements with legal connections, Mukuru residents were paying four times more for water.

The research revealed the “poverty penalty” paid by residents living in informal settlements. In addition, the research analysis found that the cost of housing, priced at 1.2 million Kenyan shillings (US\$8,000), was unaffordable given the high cost of services. There was risk to sharing the housing data with government, many of whom are land and structure owners, as this could have triggered a hike in rents. This data was therefore retained by the Federation for internal purposes only. In contrast, the data on services was used in advocacy mobilisation to highlight the injustice of the poverty penalty. The research triggered a series of practical and concrete responses to the community needs.

Using the data, the Federation engaged with the Nairobi Water and Sanitation company, which resulted in the installation of water kiosks for free and household connections to the truck water system. The electricity company initiated connections without demanding legal documentation of ownership – a significant step towards formally recognising the need for safer and better quality services in informal settlements.

One of the key discussion points from this presentation is illustrated by the following quote, in answer to the question: “What do researchers need to consider in crafting action research questions?”

“When academics design surveys, often the risk is the questions don’t fit reality. For example, monthly income is not a concept that low-income households or informal sector traders manage. Their income is irregular and comes from multiple sources, including reciprocity from neighbours. Expenditure is a more reliable starting point to understand household cash in, cash out. If framed as monthly income, it will result at best, in approximate responses, or not at all”.

– Nancy, Federation member

A key reflection that permeated throughout the workshop, reiterated by the Federation and community representatives, was the emphasis on how researchers need to work in ways that encourage more openness. In action research processes, researchers must factor in sufficient time to go through the co-design of research tools with the community. Professionals and academics tend to build research tools alone; questionnaire design is all too often a desktop operation, ignoring community realities. As a result, surveys are typically standardised rather than localised by taking the community’s perspective and interpretation of their reality as a starting point.

In addition, when first engaging with communities to gain permission for gathering data, researchers can create expectations around deliverables that are not forthcoming, because they are eager to do their research. Being aware of and managing expectations of different interest groups and gatekeepers is critically important, including being mindful that some people may not want the status quo in their settlement to change. For example, local service providers whose businesses are based on provision of services may contest change if there is no obvious benefit for them.

Some key conclusions from the discussion on this presentation included:

- Language must be simple and contextual.
- Researchers should deconstruct vocabulary and use terms that are relevant to the community.
- Importance of co-designing research, co-generating data. Co-implementation with the community and co-dissemination of knowledge are core principles for ACRC’s action research approach.
- ACRC can contribute to advancing a more innovative action research frontier by being intentional in de-schooling and unlearning of traditional research methods.

> Community-led data collection and advocacy for enacting policy

Nairobi, Kenya

*This example, shared by the SDI-Kenya Federation, **Muungano wa Wanavijiji**, explores how continual data collection and updating in community-led research processes contributed to establishing the Mukuru Special Planning Area (SPA) in Nairobi. It illustrates how a consortium of organisations was able to build momentum over several years, culminating in a policy win for informal settlements.*

In Nairobi city plans, the Mukuru settlement was designated for industrial use. Entrepreneurs who applied to set up industries were granted permission, on condition that building commenced within two years. However, many who held title deeds did not build. Some used the land as collateral to acquire bank loans but defaulted on the repayment. When the Kenya Cooperative Bank proceeded to reclaim the property, they found that people were occupying the land.

Residents who had been there for over ten years were served with an eviction notice at a period close to a national election. The Bank had given an auctioneer the green light to auction land and recover dues, but both were served with court orders to stop the auction. The Federation and SDI-Kenya served as a partner for the case, carrying out participatory action research and enumeration of households. The data analysis provided powerful evidence that indicated the settlement clearly qualified as a Special Planning Area (SPA), since it faced unique challenges associated with high density and lack of services. Women were instrumental in pushing for the SPA, mobilising around their rights to sanitation and adequate housing. Collecting 15,000 signatories, they took their petition to the Ministries of Land and Health and engaged in peaceful demonstrations. A change in power in local government catalysed a tipping point in the decisionmaking process; data and information sharing across a consortium of 18 organisations was used in an adaptive and reflexive process to fit emerging agendas. This culminated in the successful granting of the Special Planning Area status for Mukuru.

Key takeaways from this experience were:

- Recognition of the agency of community mobilisation and the centrality of community in institutionalising change. *“Nothing for us without us”* – Eva, Federation member
- Community knowledge is powerful. *“Data is dangerous for politicians.” “There was no accountability with politicians; they see the numbers, but don’t want to accept any data that could cause agitation.”*
- Anticipate radicalisation in action research and consider agency or activism to coalesce change.
- Community ownership of data instils confidence and creates lasting impact.
- Reflection and flexibility improve the action research process.
- Recognition of the role that youth agency played in the Mukuru planning research collective.

> Learning from and building on substantive experiences

Karachi, Pakistan

The experiences of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) in Karachi are familiar to many working on urban development in the global South. The OPP Research and Training Institute has worked to support community organisations to install community-led sanitation for over 100,000 households in the city. It has provided training to local agencies wanting to replicate this approach across Pakistan. The sanitation work in Karachi has been augmented by microfinance, mapping and tenure security, and health programmes.

Diana Mitlin (The University of Manchester) has benefitted from the opportunity to learn from their approach to action research.

She highlighted that:

- From the beginning, OPP staff were determined that sufficient time was set aside for learning from efforts to work with communities. They spent a day a week in reflection and knowledge development.
- Staff are very aware that they should not do “research and development” in isolation. Their belief is that their role is to provide technical assistance to low-income households and their organisations, once modalities of intervention had been co-developed. Households and communities self-finance these improvements (although they do not pay for the technical assistance).
- Staff work closely with a range of technicians and skilled workers living in the neighbourhoods, in addition to collaborating with grassroots organisations. The research is guided by multiple grassroots perspectives who work in collaboration with each other.

> Applying participatory learning and action (PLA) methods

Kampala, Uganda

*This example showcases the practical application of participatory learning and action (PLA) methods, in a community-based project that sought to build community cohesion through waste recycling and develop agro-enterprises in Kampala. Shared by **Shuaib Lwasa** (professor at the International Institute of Social Studies in the Hague), it demonstrates the practical application of PLA methods and different tools across the whole project cycle – from community entry onward – and how this contributed to fostering community participation, knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving, and testing and implementing solutions.*

The community entry activity aimed to include the community in the project team from the outset. The objective was to synchronise the community perspectives of the problems with the researchers' views, as well as appraise the channels of communication within the community – recognising that communities are not homogenous and there are different needs, views and perceptions.

The entry process was facilitated by a team from the Centre for Communication and Development, who introduced the research team to PLA methods. Utilising several

PLA methods, they contributed to strengthening the research problem tree, which enhanced the understanding of the problems for all stakeholders and helped build partnerships for the future project implementation. While the entry activities encountered delays, this demonstrated that community engagement goes beyond introducing a research agenda; it involves mobilisation, exploring project ideas and allowing time to build trust, understanding and collaboration, in community-based research initiatives.

The community entry and communication appraisal revealed spatial–social connections, which highlight the importance of understanding problems from various viewpoints within a community. The differentiation of sub-sectors or areas – each associated with specific social groups and roles – provided insights into the causes of environmental problems. This spatial–social perspective underscored the need to consider all sectors of the community by location, particularly for future planning of project activities.

Diagnostic baseline studies undertaken in the early part of the programme provided data on poverty levels. A snapshot of the conditions in the area was captured, generating preliminary information on the magnitude of poverty. It also provided invaluable information on how the community was already addressing the challenges of poverty and environmental burdens, and the community resource base through which livelihoods and neighbourhood environments could be improved. A combination of participatory tools, including participatory video, was used to capture community views on environmental burdens, as well as capture their voices. Youths and leaders carried out the video filming and editing, after receiving training. Schoolchildren also took part in an artistic competition to record views and perceptions. These tools provided outstandingly powerful messages and examples of households' adaptive coping strategies – such as occupying their houses on a temporary basis, and moving away to protect their livelihoods and assets during the flooding season.

Drawing on existing knowledge and strategies that the community had adopted in waste management activities, the project team designed customised training and capacity building, supporting technological innovation in waste management and preparing community enterprises to take on a more commercial orientation. The capacity building for enterprises aimed to enhance the community's ability to achieve improved gender-responsive and community-led food and income security. The project provided seed grants for pilot projects, with the protocol for these grants designed and initiated by establishing a multi-stakeholder committee.

Starting with pilot activities, various options were tested for their viability, with agro-enterprises, including waste recycling and nutrient reuse, fully developed. The community were proactively involved in identifying, profiling, prioritising, evaluating, adapting and improving the trialling of scalable solutions. Working through ideas and options took time and patience to allow uptake of ideas to emerge.

In addition to addressing livelihood needs, the process also proved invaluable in informing policy and catalysing interactions among urban development actors, including researchers, city managers, policymakers and political leaders – a broad spectrum of stakeholders, with the community at the heart and the majority stakeholder in the process.

These methods facilitated the community members to actively participate and contribute their perspectives, insights and experiences – fostering ownership and inclusion in the project. Furthermore, knowledge exchange and community dialogue platforms created spaces for open discussions, consensus building and the exchange of ideas among various stakeholders, community members, researchers, authorities and urban development actors.

The project activities show how participatory action research can change the relationships between researchers, communities and city authorities in their search for alternative approaches to address urban poverty and environmental challenges in Kampala.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of participatory tools depends on the specific goals, context and dynamics of the community. Combining a mix of tools tailored to the community's cultural, social and economic context is more likely to yield the most meaningful and sustained engagement.

3. Overcoming co-production obstacles and progressing action research

Comparing these examples and key lessons opens up questions about the more conceptual and operational aspects of action research, including recurring challenges and ways these might be overcome. This section provides a summary of key takeaways from the workshop discussions.

> What inhibits co-production?

The table below presents the main points emerging from the discussion around factors inhibiting co-production and what steps can be taken to sustain co-production.

Inhibitors of co-production	Enablers of co-production
Power imbalances not well managed.	Clarity in roles for accountability. Build in capacity strengthening – level the playing field. Recognise that power cannot be diminished entirely and discuss it explicitly.
Appropriate research tools not used.	Use appropriate co-designed tools that fit the context and work well with the research themes. Selecting appropriate tools and methods is at the heart of co-production. Be creative! Explore and use a range of techniques: pictures (pictorial way of gathering information); storytelling (around an event – conversational);

	<p>histories (reconstructing timelines, events); photo and video; participatory journaling; community-inclusive tools; co-design, test, validate before full rollout and adapt throughout the research process.</p> <p>Regularly review tools to contextualise to prevailing circumstances.</p>
<p>Academics' "know-it-all attitude", leading to lack of knowledge legitimatisation.</p>	<p>Self-awareness and openness – reframe your own viewpoint.</p> <p>Create room for communities to take roles, recognise their capacities in data collection, analysis and writing up.</p> <p>Maintain regular communication and adopt a willingness to adapt mindset.</p> <p>Be sensitive on language.</p> <p>Think of the process as an outcome too.</p>
<p>Reluctance to share information.</p>	<p>Community involvement in data analysis and interpretation.</p> <p>Peer-to-peer learning and sharing.</p> <p>Intentional data collection on the part of researchers to avoid extractive tactics.</p> <p>Build and nurture trust-based relationships.</p>
<p>Competing interests.</p>	<p>Instil the values of recognition and respect from the start – acknowledging everyone has valuable knowledge and a role to play.</p>
<p>Rigidity; unwillingness to be open to understanding local context.</p>	<p>Co-design action research without being prescriptive.</p> <p>Adopt continuous engagement and create flexible ways of reviewing research enquiry lines; be willing and open to adapt and change the research questions.</p> <p>Use inclusive engagement strategies.</p>
<p>Exclusion of the majority.</p>	<p>Think widely at the beginning – who are critical groups to be involved?</p> <p>Start with the widest groupings and refine.</p> <p>Community participation throughout the process.</p> <p>Be intentional in identifying the most vulnerable, invisibilised and marginalised.</p>

> Common problems encountered in action research

Key takeaways on common challenges encountered in conducting action research are summarised in the table below:

Challenge	Possible solutions
<p>Accountability and defining purpose.</p>	<p>Exercise transparency about the research and interest.</p> <p>Identify areas of mutual benefit.</p> <p>Leadership in the process. Have clarity on: for whom, by whom and with whom?</p> <p>Assess the capabilities needed to enable agreement about purpose.</p>

Too much emphasis on research, insufficient emphasis on action.	Ensure that community voices are heard and amplify if necessary. Have honest conversations about budget priorities. Find ways of being more cost-effective in knowledge generation.
Restrictive timelines.	Focus on process and output, rather than a timeframe. Be inclusive in time setting. Negotiate for funder flexibility. Worry less about perfectionism in academia. Look at available options and adapt to changes.
Indicators of success.	Make success indicators broader than the overarching donor indicators.
Limited resources and budget.	Agree on a percentage of the budget which must be invested locally. Regardless of budget constraints, action research must produce tangible improvement for communities. Co-produce budgets. Implement cost sharing (account for contributions in cash, kind recognise and remunerate community time). Embrace flexibility in financing. Recognise variations in costs. Invest in action through feasibility plans.
Risks (including economic volatility, navigating politicians, reputational risks, disaster risks, political risks, anticipated and non-anticipated delays).	Build in and maintain a strong risk analysis from the outset. Early detection of risk. Have a Plan B in place. Sustain good communication. Leadership should be experienced in risk management and mitigation.
Unintended consequences (including incomplete projects, design challenges, eviction and displacements, increase in fees).	Co-design and co-implementation. Strong safeguarding policies and practice. Continual monitoring, evaluation, learning and adaptation. Factor in “what if” scenarios as part of the risk management and decisionmaking.
Participation takes time.	Build realistic timelines, recognising that consensus building is part of the process.
Managing expectations.	Communicate clearly. Be honest – do not overstate expected outcomes.

	<p>Important for community respondents to know from the outset if there is money set aside for solutions and the scale of the intervention.</p> <p>Be frank about money, time commitment, purpose and boundaries.</p> <p>Be specific about what change will come out of this.</p> <p>Focus on co-production and local ownership as part of managing expectations.</p>
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Conclusions and next steps for ACRC

As this briefing has explored, conducting action research effectively can enable communities to play a meaningful role in addressing the challenges they face. But there can be many obstacles to overcome along the way – even in the most carefully planned action research programme.

Arising out of the examples shared and, we have identified 12 critical elements for conducting action research:

1. Commit to co-production from the outset of the action research preparations.
2. Commit to honesty in the roles and work to be undertaken.
3. Nurture a strong community and professional partnership with accountabilities in place.
4. Establish effective/efficient communication channels.
5. Provide a good induction – for example, guiding researchers on how to work with communities, and communities on how to work with researchers. Allocate time and space for this in the research planning.
6. Produce a light touch “how to” guide, which is illustrative rather than prescriptive. Guidelines should consider language, ethics and safeguarding principles, gender considerations, consent and conflict resolution, risk management and capacity strengthening.
7. Prioritise capacity strengthening – support and encourage peer learning exchanges, discussions and video/films.
8. Develop scenario plans, considering potential risks to the research and impact on the research plan and delivery. This could mean shifting sites if politics makes it impossible to move the research forward, or loops of redesign to consider new understanding and knowledge that may emerge as the research proceeds.
9. Equip communities to document their own stories, not have them retold differently by others. Communication and documentation policy are key.
10. Acknowledge community efforts in any outputs.
11. Continuously monitor and evaluate to ensure learning and to improve the experience.
12. Develop a framework that is city-/community-specific, addressing the priority complex problems identified, with capacity for replicability and creating multiple reforms.

> Suggestions for managing capacity strengthening

- Create time and space to enable communities to have a role in evidence analysis and writing up.
- Encourage and support peer-to-peer learning and less formal approaches. Capacity strengthening does not have to involve formal spaces of learning.
- Communities should use their resources as part of the negotiating process. These might include research products from previous work or community research efforts outside of formal research projects.
- Recognise levels of input through authorship.
- Recognise that communities themselves can serve as research centres or capacity-building focus points.

Action research will be the focus of the implementation phase of ACRC, taking place in Accra, Harare, Lagos, Nairobi and other African cities. We will continue to discuss and document our experiences via the ACRC website and communication channels.