

An introduction to the history, theory and practice of Participatory Action Research

Juan Mario Díaz-Arévalo

Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Sheffield
United Kingdom

The history of Participatory Action Research (PAR) is diverse and multifaceted. Despite the emergence of variations and different offshoots over the last half century, PAR is characterised as a threefold activity: i) a method of social research, ii) an educational act, and iii) a means of generating transformative action (Hall 1992).

The purpose of this text is to systematically present this triple dimension of PAR, starting with notes on its history before moving on to its theoretical, epistemological and methodological aspects.

A Brief Historical Account

The history of PAR in Colombia dates back to the early 1970s, when the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008) abandoned his role as professor at the Colombian National University and, with a group of researchers, created the Fundación de Investigación y Acción Social, popularly known as La Rosca, to support the land struggles of the peasant movement.

I specify Colombia because, while Fals Borda was developing his work in the country's Caribbean Coast, other social researchers in different parts of the world





were engaged in convergent research experiences: Budd Hall and Marja Liisa Swantz in Tanzania, Rajesh Tandon in India, Anisur Rahman in Bangladesh, John Gaventa in the United States and Joao Bosco Pinto in Brazil, to cite just a few examples.

The common ground on which many of these experiences of participatory and action-oriented research met was the dialogic and emancipatory approach to research advanced by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970.

From this set of experiences, at least three milestones, now emblematic of the development of PAR, may be identified:

1. Fals Borda's *investigación activa* (active research), which would lead to a process of critical systematisation of his own experience:

The work carried out by Fals Borda and his colleagues in La Rosca, on which an abundant bibliography exists (Negrete, 2013; Parra, 1983; Rappaport 2017, 2020; Robles and Rappaport 2018), pursued at least three closely related objectives:

- to develop an alternative model of research to the dominant positivist current, according to which the social sciences should be guided by the criteria of objectivity and neutrality characteristic of natural sciences. As Fals Borda (1970) argued, such claims of neutrality were not objective, but served to support an unjust and exclusionary order.

- to generate new knowledge through action, as a result supporting the peasant and other social movements in the pursuit their own objectives.
- to pursue a contextualised version of the Action Research method that others, such as Kurt Lewin (1946), had already developed from a more instrumentalist perspective in the United States. A crucial point in the process of self-criticism and systematisation that led to PAR was the first International Symposium on Action Research organised by Fals Borda in Cartagena in 1977.

2. The development of an International Participatory Research Network at the initiative of academics and activists and coordinated by Budd Hall in the late 1970s:

After a few years working in Tanzania, Hall edited a special issue of the journal *Convergence* (1975), which was destined to become the first academic publication dedicated to Participatory Research. With the sponsorship of the International Council for Adult Education, Hall played the leading role in the creation of an International Participatory Research Network in 1976.

Hall's meeting with Fals Borda at the 1977 Cartagena symposium led to a process of cross-fertilisation between the radical, militant ideas that marked the Latin American tradition and the emerging participatory perspective (Hall, 2005). Three years later, in 1980, the International Participatory Research Network would organise the first Forum on Participatory

Research in the city of Ljubljana, former Czechoslovakia.

At the Ljubljana Forum, considered by some to be a continuation of the 1977 Cartagena symposium (De Vries, 1980), Fals Borda presented a more elaborate version of his method, to which he gave the name which at that point he called *Investigación Acción Participante*, or Participatory Action Research (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022).

3. The "Convergence in Participatory Research" Congress held in Cartagena in 1997:

In contrast to the 56 participants who attended the first symposium in 1977, 1,850 people from 61 countries attended the 1997 Cartagena Congreso *Convergencia en Investigación Participativa*, to reflect on, celebrate and critically assess the vigorous development of P(A)R globally during the previous two decades, and to analyse challenges and potential new paths forward, notwithstanding the risk that the approach might become instrumentalised, manipulated and co-opted (Cendales et al, 2005).

Indeed, one of the new paths taken at the end of the 20th century would be the adoption of PAR methodologies by international cooperation organisations, development institutes, universities and even banks.

This development would give rise to numerous criticisms about the instrumental, cosmetic and paternalistic nature of many of these interventions (Díaz-Arévalo

and Galván-Ruiz 2024).

The milestones referred to above teach us at least three things:

i) PAR has a dynamic history that is constantly under construction, and therefore it is important to differentiate between the uses (and abuses) to which it has been put and its underlying principles, core tenets and foundational experiences.

ii) Its richness and strength lie in the fact that it was –and continues to be– the result of a process of collective construction by researchers and activists from different latitudes, concerned about the failure of the social sciences and of academia in general to offer alternatives to conditions of exploitation and poverty in the Global South and the marginalised North.

iii) It is a method susceptible to being manipulated for non-participatory purposes. Its practice therefore requires reflection, self-criticism and attention not only to the results but, above all, to the process of participation.

Theory: what is PAR?

PAR does not follow a preconceived theory or ideology about knowledge or action. Nor does it adopt a predetermined view of social transformation.

On the contrary, the construction of a collective vision of change through research is one of its principal tasks (Rahman, 1987, 2).

Thus, it could be said that PAR's complexity does not lie in its theoretical framework, but in putting its guiding principles into practice.

In ontological terms (Cornwall 2008), that is, in terms of its *deber ser* (literally, its "should be") PAR may be described as a process of dialogic research guided by a set of epistemological principles –rather than methodological strategies– and motivated by a genuine desire to know, learn and act together in response to the needs and aspirations of less favoured communities and groups (Díaz-Arévalo and Ruiz-Galván, 2024).

In brief, it is research carried out with people from a place (not about or for them) in search of practical responses (action) to real needs.

While PAR theory may seem simple, it is highly critical and challenges established power structures:

Firstly, it challenges the monopoly of knowledge and wrests control over forms of production, use and dissemination of knowledge from traditional institutions.

Secondly, it questions the subject-object relationship that has predominated not only in the social sciences but also in paternalistic or welfare-based approaches to social development.

Thirdly, remember that action is also a source of knowledge and, therefore, is not constrained by positivist criteria for validating knowledge and popular wisdom.



Finally, it recognises, legitimises and celebrates the multiplicity of epistemologies and forms of popular and ancestral knowledge (Fals Borda 1988, 1991; Hall 1975, 1992).

As Hall has pointed out, contemporary discourse on participatory research as knowledge co-production sometimes overlooks the point that the pioneering works did not seek to conceptualise the process of knowledge co-production, but rather to "validate people's knowledge-creation capacity and demonstrate that civil society was a source of knowledge" (Interview 22/10/2020).

Regarding the role of researchers, Hall recalls that, "our contribution was to provide tools that legitimised knowledge creation by people outside academia [...] This was picked up by the academic world only many years later" (ibid.).

Epistemology: Who produces knowledge, how and for whose benefit?

The epistemology of sciences in general, and of PAR in particular, refers to how knowledge is produced. In other words: to how we know what we know.

Often, this question is associated with methodologies, but it is really an epistemological matter that has more to do with 'know-how' and less with instruments or tools (the 'with what'). In the case of PAR, the how is determined by the way its three components –research, participation and action– interact in accordance with the circumstances of the context.

This is why each PAR experience, although guided by the same epistemological principles, will always be unique and unrepeatable (Rappaport 2020).

If we look at Fals Borda's works on Action Research as a whole (1973; 1979; Bonilla et al, 1970), as well as other writings in which he presents a more elaborate vision of PAR (1987; 1988; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), at least five distinctive epistemological principles may be identified:

1. It is an approach that, by making its commitment to the cause of the less favoured explicit, questions the positivist principle of neutrality and objectivity in the social sciences.
2. It is a form of knowledge co-production that, by generating horizontal relationships, challenges the traditional division between researcher and researched.
3. It is a method that, by generating a relationship between knowing and doing, overcomes the dichotomy between theory and practice.
4. It is a process that recognises, values and promotes popular knowledge, while seeking to contribute to strengthening the capacities, skills and infrastructures required if marginalised groups are to research their own realities and develop agency.
5. PAR emerges from a people-centred approach to knowledge in which participants are recognised as *sentipen-*

sante beings, meaning, agents who feel, think and act.

It is clear that when we talk about epistemological principles, we are not referring to strictly theoretical formulations, but to criteria that seek to ensure a circular relation between theory, practice and critical reflection (Cornwall 2002; 2003). This set of epistemological principles, like others that are similar and widely accepted (see Hall 1992; McTaggart, 1997), allows us to conclude that, despite many possible theoretical and methodological variations, the epistemological question par excellence in PAR is: who benefits from the research process? (Wallerstein and Duran 2008).

Method and methodologies: the 'what for' and 'with what' of knowledge co-production

Over the last three decades, the development of methodologies based on art and on technological innovations has been extraordinary. These range from participatory video techniques to the use of motion capture systems to produce digital stories (Galván-Ruiz 2024).

One of the most recent efforts to compile methodologies and tools in participatory research (Burns et al., 2021, Part 4) dedicates 45 chapters to documenting significant experiences in different fields of knowledge, as well as to the use, among other techniques, of dialogic research strategies and techniques, digital tools, visual and performative methods and evaluation and monitoring mechanisms.

The implementation of new and advanced technological resources, however, does not relegate or displace traditional ethnographic research methodologies such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups or social cartography.

Likewise, the implementation of new techniques is not in itself a preventive measure against the risk, always present in all research, of generating dynamics of exclusion, replicating asymmetries and silencing divergent or uncomfortable voices (Cornwall 2008).

Accordingly, it could be said that it is not the techniques or methodological strategies that guarantee the participatory nature of research (its ontology), but rather the convergence between epistemology and the adopted methodological approach.

What does episte-methodological convergence mean in practice?

In simple terms, this means that the contextual conditions and the transformative goals set by the participants define the tools or techniques to be used or created.

In other words, the toolbox is subordinate to methodological concerns which, ultimately, are themselves subject to the epistemological principles that determine and enable the course of action.

Therefore, it is worth remembering the methodological cores that Fals Borda held were particular to PAR (for a more



complete and detailed analysis see Fals Borda, 1987; 1988; Rappaport, 2020), namely:

1. Collective and dialogic research on contextual problems and their structural causes, using traditional ethnographic techniques, as well as visual and art-based approaches, including graphic histories, puppet shows and theatre. The purpose here was not only to develop research into particular contexts, but to make it easier to identify the broader framework within which local problems occur.

2. Solidarity with the struggles of oppressed groups also required the use of different techniques to activate collective memory. One of the main "incentivisation techniques", as they were called, was the critical recovery of history (Bonilla, 1972: 50-51). The activation of collective memory sought to rescue life stories from oblivion, alongside collective experiences that could be reactivated in present day struggles. This might be achieved through the analysis of *archivos de baúl* [kitchen archives], the name Fals Borda gave to informal domestic collections of documents that were capable of stimulating collective memory through dialogue.

3. The valuation of local culture and traditions as a way to promote the production and dissemination of new knowledge with the capacity to promote collective action.

4. The co-production and dissemination of knowledge using different formats and levels of scientific language capable

of ensuring effective communication with intellectuals, activists and members of local communities.

5. Systematic feedback [*devolución sistemática*] that responded to "the obligation to systematically return [*devolver*] this knowledge to communities and workers' organisations, because they remain its owners" (Fals Borda, 1987: 344). As Rappaport (2020) has pointed out, some have interpreted "devolver" to mean the act of presenting finished products to a passive audience that has not participated in the process, which, in turn, has generated criticism about a supposed hierarchical relationship implied by the very act of "returning" research results to communities.

For Fals Borda, however, the process of systematic feedback involved "the creation of educational vehicles oriented to the capacities and needs of their audiences" (Rappaport, 2020: 133), including graphic histories, pamphlets and puppet theatre. Thus, in PAR, systematic feedback does not occur at the end, as if it were a simple validation of finished products, but throughout the entire process.

One aspect that is essential if epistemological and methodological convergence is to occur is the creation of training opportunities for community members to enable them to be genuinely involved in methodological work and collective analysis.

More important than teaching techniques is contributing to the training of trainers;

that is, fostering a learning atmosphere in which people from local organisations and groups can learn, adapt and use the methodology beyond the scope of a specific project, so that they can formulate and research their own questions.

This training is not unidirectional. Rather, it involves a process of mutual learning in which the visions and methodological practices of researchers are questioned and enriched by local practice and knowledge.

This is precisely what this toolkit is about. The material we share here is not a technical description of qualitative methods, but a methodological resource that has emerged from a process that articulated a collectively defined research agenda.

It is a plan for the training of trainers that led to the creation of three research semilleros and the development in the field of a set of research techniques that were adapted, transformed and enriched with local practices and community knowledge.

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