Action research – testing underlying theories of change
Roopa Hinton, CARE International UK[1]

The Governance Action Research Initiative

CARE's programmes increasingly recognise weak governance as an underlying cause of poverty and citizen participation is a critical element of our governance theory of change. Traditional results based approaches to evaluation are ill suited for the complex and emergent changes that occur in such programmes.[2] Moreover, results-based evaluations tend to prioritise upward accountability to donors in the absence of meaningful accountability to citizens, contradicting values underpinning participatory approaches and frustrating opportunities to learn.[3] Endeavouring to move beyond these constraints CARE UK piloted the Governance Action Research Initiative (GARI) that has encouraged us to probe our assumptions and theories of change in ways that enable learning about how governance changes happen.

The investigation was very loosely guided by the core research question: *how does CARE's work impact on governance outcomes?* This broad question situated CARE, its actions and its relationships, at the heart of the research. It also created the room for CARE offices to define specific areas of research that are most relevant to their work. This aimed to create ownership and organisational buy-in for the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) initiative. The initiative's action research methodology sought to enhance organisational learning and the quality of our governance work. Action research embraces a wide range of methodologies but is characterised in the GARI by core principles: participatory, commitment to action, and validation of different forms of knowledge.

The GARI was implemented in six countries: Angola, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Nepal and Peru. Research questions and themes were identified in a participatory process including stakeholders such as CARE staff, community organisations and NGO partners. The broad research question was identified before the design process. This ensured senior management's ownership of the research, and also allowed us to include appropriate internal and external stakeholders. All research questions were directly related to analysing the impacts of our work on governance. The design workshop mapped out our understanding of governance processes and the gaps in our knowledge, identifying relevant research themes and then unpacked sub-questions for these themes. All the studies were interested in understanding how CARE's work on citizen empowerment and participatory governance had improved the access of marginalised groups to public resources (such as public land, government services).

The research was conducted in different ways in each office. CARE Angola and CARE Peru supported community organisations (area-based CBOs and indigenous women's organisations, respectively) that had been part of their programmes to undertake the research. CARE Nepal hired people from within communities to conduct the data

collection with the support of CARE and partner staff. In Madagascar, Mali and Malawi CARE and partner staff undertook the research themselves. The studies used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methodologies depending on the research theme and staff capacities. In most cases additional orientation and training was provided on research methodologies, providing the space for community- and staff-researchers to develop their skills and confidence. At regular intervals a wider group of stakeholders analysed the data and information collected, identifying new research themes and questions and also actions that could be undertaken to resolve particular issues. This then fed into the next phase of research and analysis.

GARI's Outcomes

Drawing from experiences in six CARE country offices, our case study demonstrates the exciting results of the GARI. Firstly by engaging diverse stakeholders in the definition of research questions, themes and indicators, the collection of data and its analysis, the GARI created deeper motivation and energy for the learning process and ownership of the findings. This participative approach promoted greater openness of stakeholders to the more challenging findings, such as questions of accountability and representativeness of the CBOs with which we work in Angola.

Conducting research and analysis built communities', partners' and CARE's research and analytical capabilities. These are also transferable skills as CBO partners in the research are now more able to lead community discussions, enhancing their confidence and role in communities. Furthermore despite the pressures on time faced by community researchers they valued their participation in GARI because it had built their skills and allowed them to engage with their governments and power-holders as equals.

The GARI also contributed directly to governance processes.   In Nepal the GARI has helped to increase awareness of both marginalised citizens and duty-bearers on rights and provisions for the poorest. Unintentionally this has increased demand and to some degree institutional responsiveness. The GARI encouraged dialogue and partnership between community researchers and government, arguably contributing to increased openness and responsiveness of local government. For example, in Angola, the interviews with municipalities conducted by community researchers and the joint analysis meetings also can be seen as a form of advocacy. As a result the CBOs have been granted membership of municipal councils therefore enhancing their opportunity to engage and influence local government. In Peru the indigenous women stated that conducting the research and presenting the findings to authorities was felt to be an expression of their equal and empowered citizenship.

Also GARI has encouraged stakeholders to reflect on their own practices and on CARE's interventions, which has transformed relations and increased our accountability to partners and beneficiaries. The participatory nature of GARI in Angola led to increased demand from CBOs for greater equality and mutual accountability in their relationship with CARE. This has led to the inclusion of these CBOs in CARE's planning and project design processes. The experience of conducting action research on governance in Nepal highlighted the importance to CARE and its partners of addressing their own accountability to beneficiaries. The GARI has also enabled CARE to establish new relationships, such as with government and political parties. In Malawi the action research approach has been extended to a broader learning group including other

NGOs and the Ministry of Local Government, which has facilitated discussion and advocacy on decentralised governance.

The action research has also deepened our understanding of complex change pathways. The GARI studies challenged our assumption that women's participation and leadership will lead to changes in domestic relations and roles; instead there was a double burden on women's time as women still carried out their domestic responsibilities in addition to participating in public decision-making. This emphasised the importance of bringing citizen empowerment together with broader empowerment strategies in the private sphere and the need to understand the different barriers that inhibit women's participation in civil society and government. The GARI also suggested that while it is necessary to facilitate empowerment processes it is not sufficient; successful governance programming also needs to engage duty-bearers and build their capacities and responsiveness. Finally the GARI challenged our assumptions on the role of community governance, demonstrating the gaps in the representativeness and accountability of community institutions to their constituencies.

The continuous cycle of questioning, analysis and action piloted in the GARI has allowed lessons to be fed into action in a timely fashion. Through the GARI process community groups in Angola were able to identify the weaknesses in their own organisations and take actions to resolve these, such as reinstating regular dialogues with communities to discuss priority issues. Community organisations in Malawi have also been able to use the findings of the action research to identify stakeholders they want to engage with such as local leaders and challenges they need to address such as their own inclusivity. In Nepal the continuous research and experimentation allowed projects to try new activities to improve the flow of information and then analyse whether these achieved the desired changes. This dynamic and flexible nature of action research has promoted more adaptable programming.

GARI has opened up CARE's M&E processes to new stakeholders embedding our measures of success in a more participatory vision of change, which has created ownership for learning processes in the CARE offices involved. The GARI in Nepal helped the project teams to articulate the kinds of changes they are trying to promote at the community group level, and then to analyse whether or not they are achieving these. Further, action research is increasingly becoming an important strand of CARE's M&E systems promoting more in-depth learning about our practices, integrating the approach into our organisational processes, such as strategic planning and project design and budgeting.

Challenges
Conversely undertaking participatory processes such as action research has posed some challenges both internally and externally. It was a challenge to build the confidence of staff and our partners to conduct research. There was some anxiety at the beginning of the initiative that research is the domain of experts and not practitioners. The lack of analytical skills was a particular concern when it came to drawing out linkages and trends in the information collected, and could have compromised the quality of analysis at times. This was somewhat mitigated through the training and orientation on research at the beginning of the GARI. Also the practice of conducting research and analysis built skills and confidence.

Furthermore, overcoming tensions that have arisen from challenges to our assumptions about the impact of our work and our relationships with beneficiaries and partners has required real openness to learn. Related to this, in some participating offices, there has been resistance to the implications of the GARI's findings among those less involved in the initiative. Therefore for this kind of M&E initiative to achieve wider change in our programming it is essential that lessons are fed into programme design, strategic planning and organisational practices.

A much cited challenge has been the perceived trade off between the level of participation and the effectiveness of research outputs. Participative processes are seen to be time consuming and to move more slowly. Community actors involved in the research experienced opportunity costs of participation and increased time burden, often unremunerated. Finally, there were concerns regarding the sustainability of the GARI as it is often difficult to maintain momentum, perhaps due to the time-intensive nature of action research and also because unless it is clearly built into the project methodology it can be seen as an add-on or something that is "nice to do".

Results

The case study demonstrates that participatory action research approaches to testing theories of change can enable more inclusive learning for organisations than traditional evaluation approaches. The participatory nature of GARI has brought learning at many different levels and generated a culture of learning within CARE and our partners.

The GARI has allowed CARE to identify intended and unintended impacts of our programmes. This has brought together the site of learning and the site of action, enhancing both skills and opportunities to improve governance programme quality and effectiveness, and thus potentially make them better value for money. There have also been unexpected results of the GARI process itself as it has created energy within CARE and our partners for greater transparency and downward accountability and has transformed our relationships with beneficiaries and government in some contexts.

Concluding remarks: Lessons

For sustained learning it is crucial for action research to be embedded within organisational processes, and programming methodologies. Learning, design and implementation are all interrelated and therefore need to be brought together synergistically by the organisation. Although action research approaches to M&E require resources, capacity, time and organisational buy-in, the potential gains are high and often lead to more active and continuous learning for a diverse group of stakeholders. This enhances our accountability relationships, horizontally and downwards, and also promotes more complex and adaptive programming.