Reflections on the potential (and limits) of action research as ethos, methodology and practice: A case study of a women's empowerment programme in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper argues that an evidence-based approach to advocacy led by and targeting women could amplify women's positioning in the political and economic realms. Participatory Action Research is examined as a process for mobilisation, coalition-building and evidence-based advocacy and action, through a case study of a

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multi-country British Council supported programme that incorporated an action research approach.[1] Drawing from the experiences and perceptions of its participants, it offers reflective insights into the theory and practice of action research and its empowerment potential. The findings confirm a widespread support for the use of Participatory Action Research as a starting point for stronger advocacy work, showing its positive transformative effects on individuals, groups and coalition. Participatory Action Research contributes to evidence-based advocacy that is more relevant and inclusive, and arguably empowering for women advocates.

Introduction

In the past few years, countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have experienced significant political and social change, with citizen action and widespread public protests generating new opportunities for political change and collective action. Women have played a prominent role, attempting to become more engaged in the public and political spheres beyond direct participation; and advocating for change. Governments, international organisations and civil society groups have championed a variety of approaches and strategies to increase women's political and economic participation and their effectiveness at leadership levels (National Democratic Institute, 2013; The World Bank, 2013). One of these ways has been the integration of an evidence-based approach to advocacy, led by and targeting women. Action research is argued to be a viable tool for engaging coalitions of women activists together with stakeholders (Farrell, 2014; INTRAC, unpublished internal document).

This paper presents a case study of a multi-country British Council supported programme that incorporated an action research approach.[2] It is entitled Women Participating in Public Life (WPIPL) and it was implemented in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. Drawing from the experiences and perceptions of participants and other stakeholders involved in the WPIPL programme, it offers a new and reflective insight into the theory and practice of action research by examining the extent to which Participatory Action Research (PAR)[3] as an ethos and methodology can be considered a viable tool for the empowerment of women in civic and political life in the MENA region.

After introducing the case study under examination, we present the methodology and limitations of this participatory reflection exercise and its outcome in the form of this paper. Three main findings are then discussed: (1) PAR distinctiveness and its capacity to strengthen advocacy work; (2) the positive and transformative

effects of PAR; (3) challenges that limit the potential of PAR. In the concluding reflections, we answer the core questions that this paper asks: (1) to what extent did the *practice* (of applying action research within the WPIPL) mirror the promise of action research, and PAR in particular, as purported by the theory; and (2) does PAR offer anything of value to empowerment and sustainable change among women and potentially other civil society actors in the MENA region? Whilst identifying the positive aspects of this approach, the paper also flags some important challenges.

WPIPL: A case study

> Women's political empowerment is envisaged as the vehicle that allows women to exercise their leadership ... Political empowerment also implies enhancing individual competencies, building collectives and developing collaborations and networks for women to be effective agents of change. (Farrell, 2014, p. 816)[4]

The equal exercise of political rights of men and women is an essential human rights principle and a tenet of any democratic framework. Women's political participation was and is to be considered central to democratic governance (Ballington, 2005). Yet formal acknowledgement of women's political rights alone does not always impact on the political activity of women. In the MENA region, despite constitutional and legislative guarantees of women's rights to political participation and the growing interest in human rights conventions and protocols from governments, the extent of women's participation is still very low. Closing gender gaps in education and health did not translate into higher levels of female participation in the economic and political life of the region (The World Bank, 2004): the Arab region still has the lowest average representation of women in parliaments compared to other world regions (Derichs, 2010). The so-called 'MENA gender equality paradox' has remained unresolved to this day as a multiplicity of social, economic, legal and political factors are at work, establishing individual and institutional norms within society and shaping the status of women in the region (Sabbagh, 2005; The World Bank, 2013; UNDP, 2006).

In this context, despite a vast number of women's empowerment initiatives, women's active engagement in the public and political sphere remains limited. Moreover, beyond formal politics, little is known about how women can influence decision-making and the different strategies and pathways that are effective for engaging such processes. For instance, it is to be noted that women's political participation can take place in many different forms through charitable organisations and women's research centres (Derichs, 2010). This suggests the need for new approaches to better understanding and strengthening women's participation. For those not engaged, we must understand the reasons that inhibit them and find ways to reach out and draw them in. For those who do have an interest in the political sphere or who have reached decision-making positions, their journey and degree of influence remain under-researched. The need for a deeper and more critical

understanding of the issues that confront women is clear. Such an evidence base could significantly strengthen advocacy efforts. It is this broader view of political participation and the importance of evidence-based advocacy that underpins the British Council and INTRAC's strategy in WPIPL.

The WPIPL programme and its participants to the action research component constitute the units of analysis in this critical case study (Yin, 2003). The programme, implemented between 2012 and 2016, aimed at building the capacity of women and broad-based support for their active involvement in public life including national and local political processes in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia through three main strategies: the British Council's Active Citizens programme,[5] action research, and learning networking and coalition building.

WPIPL included women, and a few men, practitioners, activists and volunteers members of civil society organisations based in the target countries. The British Council regional and country offices identified the organisations based on four strategies depending on the different contexts. In Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Morocco, the country offices held information sessions and launched open calls for application. In Tunisia, a main institutional partner, the Coalition of Women of Tunisia, was identified upfront as the only registered women's coalition in the country consisting of more than 30 organisations. In Libya, due to the constraints of the post-conflict environment, the country office selected the organisations based on their knowledge of a complex context where civil society organisations and women organisations in particular were only a recent product of the 2011 revolution. In Egypt, the country office reached out directly to previously known organisations but also launched a call for interest and selected participants from among those who applied.

Once the organisations were identified, the participants to the action research component were nominated by their respective organisations according to criteria developed by the WPIPL programme. Those criteria were: (1) Strong background and commitment on working on women's political participation issues; (2) rooted in local civil society through involvement in some organisation(s) with solid experience in this field; (3) ability and willingness to work with others, compromise as necessary to enable the group to move forwards together; (4) aware of and prepared to put in the time and effort over a period of time understanding that there will not be a great deal of funding attached to the programme; (5) readiness to accept the Action Research Report as the basis for working towards evidence-based advocacy so as not to undermine the efforts and direction that has been forged over the past year. The participants were also asked to actively include the voices of different societal groups within their research projects and were supported to strengthen their ability to engage with these groups and organisations.

As pointed out in the opening quote to this section, political empowerment requires enhanced collaboration, strong networks and individual competencies. In this spirit, the WPIPL programme has focused on building the capacities and confidence of women as individuals, as active members of their respective

organisations and as coalitions. It sought to strengthen coalitions of women's groups and to improve advocacy work through an action research approach to promote different avenues to political participation on issues that affect their lives. It strived for engendering stronger ownership and genuine engagement. Cross-regional cooperation and exchanges among the national groups were key and ensured through the implementation, management and supervision of the activities by the British Council MENA manager and INTRAC staff, as well as through various opportunities for exchanges, trainings and reflection.[6]

The 'promise' of action research in the context of WPIPL

The term 'action research' denotes a family of research approaches that are highly participatory and seek to democratise the knowledge generation process. Its strength lies in its promise for 'a participatory democratic [research] process' and focus on devising 'practical solutions [or 'actions'] of pressing concern to people' (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Action research is unapologetically value-driven and interpretative, openly declaring its desire to empower and create social change *for and with* communities (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Its critique of positivist approaches underpins its view that there needs to be a shift of knowledge-power made possible by engaging a 'consciencised' and socially respon-sible community of practitioners and researchers (Chambers, 1997; Freire, 1976; Lewin, 1946), in order to co-produce knowledge that is action oriented and might include changing and improving practices, finding practical solutions to problems, or changing power relations.

PAR, as conceptualised and adopted in this study, is a methodology based on such an alternative system of knowledge production with a particular emphasis on 'processes of collaboration and dialogue that empower, motivate, increase self-esteem and develop community solidarity' (Reason, 1994, p. 329). As defined by Reason (1994), it is based on 'the peoples' roles in setting agendas, participating in data gathering and analysis, and controlling the use of outcomes' themselves. PAR is differentiated from action research in its focus on subject participation, which aims at generating 'locally-relevant' knowledge capable of addressing real-life issues (Baldwin, 2012), and fostering a sense of ownership that will ensure the outcomes of the research are 'empowering and sustaining' (van Rooyen & Gray, 1995, p. 97).

In the context of women's political empowerment in the Middle East region, this paper contends that PAR does indeed *promise* a very different way of working, a more collaborative action-oriented ethos and methodology and an opportunity for women to co-create their own context-relevant gendered knowledge and assert this knowledge as social and political reality and basis for action. In WPIPL, women from civil society organisations were engaged within their respective coun-tries across the two cycles of PAR: (a) getting the action research designed, imple-mented and documented (Cycle 1), followed by (b) developing an advocacy campaign on women's political participation (Cycle 2). The initial research team
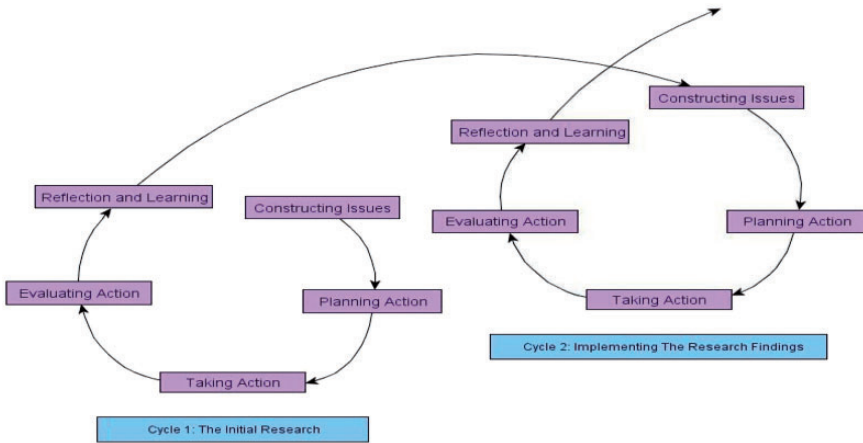
Figure 1. The action research cycle in the Women Participating in Public Life programme
Source: 'Women Participating in Public Life: Action Research Component Guidelines (version 2, February 2014)' INTRAC and British Council, 2014: p. 8.

was expanded to incorporate more participants in the second cycle of advocacy planning and campaigning.

The action research cycle with its constituent steps of evaluation, action and reflection (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010) were adapted within the WPIPL programme into five core stages across the two cycles of the PAR process as illustrated in the figure above. Throughout each stage, women participating in WPIPL were immersed in the ethos and methodology characteristic of action research as described above. To begin with, Stage 1, 'Constructing the issue', involved a series of training workshops on action research, problem tree exercises to analyse and define root causes of issues affecting women's political participation, followed by collective presentations and discussions to prioritise and select the research issue, which were opened up to questions and peer review by other country groups. Stages 2 and 3, 'Planning Action' and 'Taking Action', involved research design and implementation: agreeing key research questions, sub questions, sample selection, ethics and risk reduction, role division within the research team, piloting questions and data collection and management. Stage 4, 'Evaluating Action', involved reflecting on data, analysis, reflecting on challenges and limitations. Stage 5, 'Reflection and Learning', brought all country groups together as a coalition to share their experiences, their research focus, their key findings and their challenges. Collectively, they learned about each other's realities and challenges, and exchanged lessons and advice. An intended by-product of this step was to keep the momentum and mobilise a collectively owned strategy of action. It is worth noting that reflection slots were also integrated throughout each step and not left only till the end of each cycle. Along the same lines, the second advocacy cycle

tackled translating key findings into a well-thought advocacy campaign owned by all, following through each step and working in a highly participatory environment with a focus on the action that would emerge at the end.[7] All participants representing their respective organisations took part in each stage across both cycles. Similarly decisions were made through collective discussion, reflection and debate until consensus was reached within country groups, and later the larger coalition.

Methodology and limitations

This paper is an outcome of a participatory reflection exercise, which aimed at gauging the extent to which PAR was understood, how it was experienced, and its outcomes on individuals, groups and the advocacy issue at hand. The carving out of moments of collective reflection is a key characteristic of the action learning cycle (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010), the primary purpose being to encourage participants to step back from 'to-do mode' (Smith, 2007) and critically reflect upon the methodology, process and assumptions of action research in relation to the practice. Data were collected through qualitative methods and were analysed thematically. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews with participants from five countries (female activists, members of women's civil society organisations and volunteers) were conducted as group interviews, individual face-to-face or Skype interviews.[8] For a complementary institutional perspective, partner organisation heads from each country contributed with their institutional perspective on the action research approach and perceived outcomes. Key informants from the British Council and INTRAC were also interviewed. A review of the literature pertaining to the WPIPL programme[9] and wider literature on women's political participation and action research methodology was also conducted.

In this way, a range of perspectives across countries was obtained enabling the research team to tease out distinct as well as recurring themes across research participants in the region- and helped inform clear trustworthy conclusions. One limitation in this study was time constraints that led to less participation from Tunisia and Egypt as compared with the other countries.[10] Furthermore, as this study was not designed to be a comparative case study, the widely diverse sociocultural and political differentials across countries involved warrants further research for more in depth analysis of cross-contextual variations.

Findings

The findings present a snapshot of WPIPL participants' engagements with PAR and their perceptions of its added value and inherent challenges. Three key findings are presented and discussed here, supported by anecdotes, quotes and reflections from the study.

PAR is distinctive and strengthens advocacy work

There was consensus among those who contributed to this reflection exercise that the *generation of evidence* is an important step that strengthens advocacy and allows for change. The question is: how did they see this process practically unfold?

PAR develops a better understanding of society and real needs through locally derived and relevant knowledge. During facilitated sessions with participants from several country teams, the participants agreed that preceding their work with research gave them a 'better understanding of [their own] societies and the reality and [enabled them to] analys[e] it from social, cultural, economic and psychological perspectives'.[11] There were several references to the role of PAR in helping uncover 'real and different needs of women' at both grassroots and managerial levels, and developing empowerment work based on that. From the perspective of the head of an Egyptian partner organisation, active engagement and advocacy begins from the stage of construction and planning of issues, which she refers to as 'the design phase':

> The deep thinking in the design phase encourages participants to engage a more diverse sample of stakeholders, including other groups such as men, which has produced valuable insights.

Action research in itself was seen to be a distinctive form of research in a number of ways. Several participants saw more value in PAR than traditional academic research, simply because it is conducted for the purpose of 'solving social issues' and in order to lead to action 'most needed at this time in this society'. In other words, the power of PAR rests on the ability to extract knowledge that is locally derived and relevant. This view is confirmed by participants from Libya and Palestine who described action research as 'real' as opposed to some research that is completely disconnected from people's lived realities:

> ... action research [is designed] to identify 'real life issues', 'real problems', and because of that it is of direct benefit to everyday realities and the work we do. (Libyan participant)

PAR leads to relevant advocacy interventions and greater ability to influence positive change. Some participants recalled how, often, programmes and campaigns were detached from the women they claimed to support. On the contrary, the research helped produce an evidence base upon which activities could be planned. Incorporating action research as a pre-step to participants' advocacy campaigns and programmes was described by participants as 'very useful', 'necessary' and 'undoubtedly a positive thing'. A range of perspectives highlight its perceived role in leading to more relevant interventions of tangible benefit made possible through the generation of

relevant knowledge based on 'real' locally defined needs. This was seen to lead to effective planning of interventions and an ability to influence change at policy and societal level.

PAR leads to more credible and respected advocacy. Research participants shared the perspective that PAR has the capacity to make advocacy programmes more credible and respected. This is captured most clearly in the below quote:

> I can now interact with political parties with more confidence because I have evidence and believe in the issue. I can criticize them and stand up to them because they can't defend their position when there is evidence. (Palestinian participant)

Preceding a programme and advocacy work with a research process was something new for those practitioners accustomed to plunging in to address an issue of concern. This reflects a wider problem among civil society actors, where prioritisation of efforts and construction of advocacy work is not always based on empirical evidence and insights from key stakeholders. Participants were positive about the role of research in producing 'successful advocacy'. They added that the methodology added a scientific aspect for advocacy so the subjects of research became more objective and accountable, as it explored the best methods of targeted advocacy in relation to different audiences. In a context where women can be stereotyped as lacking men's 'decisiveness' and being too 'emotional' to participate effectively in public life, PAR enables women to counteract such false impressions, bolstered by the solid evidence they have collected.

PAR is a process through which to develop relations with and among practitioners and stakeholders while transforming women from beneficiaries into partners. In relational terms, what most participants saw as unique in PAR was its insistence on involving practitioners in the research process, engaging a wide range of stakeholders concerned with the subject from the problem identification phase through the design, data collection, analysis and the action that followed. In the words of a Lebanese participant,

> Such a mode of working requires but also maintains commitment among the stakeholders involved.

PAR helped them see the added value of working more closely with civil society actors and beneficiaries as partners in the changes desired. For some practitioners, being engaged in PAR was itself 'new', exciting', to some 'daunting', while for others, it was something their organisations did but their roles had been limited within the research process. Moreover, what participants from several countries appreciated about PAR was the fact that it transformed women from beneficiaries to partners, and gave several participants the sense of being closer to the members of their local community.

PAR pushes the boundaries of academic researchers through a refreshing and useful methodology. Finally, it was interesting to observe how more experienced researchers and heads of partner organisations from the region perceived PAR. They expressed a shared view that exposure to PAR had been refreshing: its focus on the action primarily reconfigured the research as 'something useful rather than passive and only read by a few'. According to one organisation head, PAR encouraged academics and activists to reflect upon the hows and whys of their own research and delve deeper into areas that would make a difference to their empowerment work. However, there were some concerns regarding rigour and the fact that the findings would not be taken seriously since inexperienced researchers conducted the research. There were also researchers (INTRAC research team) who viewed PAR as one among many other useful tools; it may work well in some situations but not be the best tool in others.

Positive (transformative) effects

All participants in this study acknowledged distinct benefits of being part of PAR on both personal and professional levels. These included developing research skills, self-confidence and a new mode of thinking and working.

Capacities built in research skills. For many of the women, accustomed to delegating research design and leadership to an external researcher, it was the first time they were fully immersed in a research process from design to write-up. Those with some experience had been focused on certain parts of the research process, such as field based data collection or literature reviews. Some came from a positivist background, and to them the use of qualitative research methods was completely new.

Participants expressed a strong desire to learn and valued the 'learning by doing' approach. They were walked through each stage of the research process: an initial workshop involved collective deliberation and analysis to agree on one issue the group would focus on and address. Once consensus was achieved and the issue was constructed, analysed and justified, relevant research questions and sub-questions were set to draw out data that would be translated into the evidence base for the next stage of advocacy work.

Participants expressed mixed feelings about their involvement in the research process through all its stages, referring to it as 'a new experience' and one participant describing the design phase of the research plan, as 'a time-consuming but exciting process'. A number of participants were 'unsure' about their ability as researchers at times and lacked confidence, particularly in data analysis skills.

The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data and the selection and design of research tools such as questionnaires and focus groups was the most challenging but also most rewarding task that led to the acquisition of new technical skills. Teams were alerted to good research practice steps such as the importance of piloting tools before going out into the field, the notion of triangulation to increase credibility, ethics and risk assessment procedures and the facilitation of interviews

and focus group discussions. Some of these were surprisingly not used by some researchers and academics among the teams in their previous research experiences. The fact that qualitative research is no less credible than quantitative data was an 'aha' moment for a number of participants, noted by INTRAC facilitators.

Despite these mixed feelings, across the board, the benefit of being part of the research experience was recognised and articulated clearly. The quote below captures this finding succinctly:

> It is the first time I am part of a research process from its very beginning, it has helped me become more focused because I am looking into a specific issue and I want specific answers ... and in my role as a development practitioner my work has become more meticulous. (This experience) has added a lot because for the first time in my life I am very alert and have greater awareness of things. I have become more professional and able to conduct research from A-Z so it has been a very useful experience for me. (Palestinian participant)

Self-confidence in ability to research and engage. Findings revealed a clear improved self-perception, generally increased self-esteem, as well as enhanced self-confidence in specific skills and public engagement. It was evident that for many, being part of PAR had been a learning curve at a number of levels, as the following accounts will show.

At the level of conducting research, participants who had initially felt unsure about their ability to be action researchers, had directly participated throughout all stages of design, implementation and analysis. PAR guiding principle that the research should be practitioner-led raised some initial scepticism. There were questions about who would lead the research, who would do the analysis, with expectations expressed that an external consultant or researcher would take on that role. But as teams went through these stages, they learned by doing, seeking support and advice from INTRAC and the British Council at critical points. A couple of participants were so inspired by the methodology that they are pursuing higher education in women's political participation and interested in using PAR as methodology. In a public showcasing of Levant country projects, participants were interrogated by academics on their methodological choices and sampling, and stood their ground defending their choices – a sign of their gains in knowledge and confidence as researchers (INTRAC researcher).

Additionally, several participants came to recognise the importance of an active role for practitioners and activists in the research process. What is most significant about this finding is that the empowerment felt by women activists as a result of being part of this action-oriented knowledge generation, challenged their current *modus operandi*:

> It makes a lot of sense that we are deeply involved in researching the issues that we work on.

Apart from the research skills, other important soft skills were acquired such as women's ability to articulate and defend their points or build a strong case for their choice of topic and methodological approach, as mentioned earlier. Within a group setting, there were frequent referrals to skills acquired in building consensus and bridging differences of opinions, respecting differences and negotiating and communicating with a variety of stakeholders. In the words of a Moroccan participant:

> (PAR) had a big positive impact on me on how I work and think within a group.

The collaborative mode of working and consensus building within country groups and their respective organisations showed new ways of working, which were horizontal and mutually respectful. They encouraged a transparent mutually respectful mode of working and challenged embedded power dynamics not only within groups but also within the wider coalition. One participant asserted the importance of democratic practice within groups where members were equal decision-makers in the process. Another one was pleased to be given a say at every stage of the research and to realise that decisions were not determined centrally by one organisation or person but were the results of a shared process. The space given to country teams to select their own research topic also indicates this shift towards giving power to civil society actors in shaping the programme rather than it being dictated by the donor.

A large measure of confidence was also gained in participants' readiness to confront senior figures such as MPs, policy makers and other activists and researchers, as articulated by the following participants:

> (PAR) increased my confidence and gave me courage to speak more with people as well as decision makers.

> It was new to us to speak with women at senior level as well as at grassroots level. This kind of exposure to all kinds of women gives us greater insight and confidence in representing all these views through our advocacy work.

A participant from Palestine is more explicit and shares how taking part in PAR has 'empowered' her more.

> Though I consider myself already empowered, since I participated in the action research process, I feel I more empowered because I am able to confront those in decision making positions with a strong case based on evidence.

It is fair to say that these expressions of change indicate a significant level of self-perceived personal transformation and professionalization at the individual level. This self-actualised change expressed by some participants was confirmed by

others who also noticed these positive changes in some participants, describing it as transformative and empowering:

> I saw two women in particular change! They went a long way. Their personality, knowledge, how to tackle problems, how to deal with constituency ... all these were influenced by being part of the [PAR] process. I felt this. It was an amazing change. Maybe it was caused by not only action research, but I think by gaining an understanding of legislation for example, it helped them put pressure and do things differently. It led to amazing changes through their meetings with government and civil society sector – they clearly had greater impact in terms of their ability to persuade and discuss the issues. (Egypt partner organisation head)

Impact on work, thinking and communication. The findings suggested that the skills and mode of working within the PAR had left positive residues in the way participants now work and think. This suggests that a measure of 'adaptive expertise' (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993) was acquired as a result of their engagement in the PAR of the WPIPL programme. This is significant as it points to the potential of sustaining the positive changes resulting from this project beyond its life cycle. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) argue that 'action research can become a habit of mind, a process of progressive problem solving that leads to a form of adaptive expertise', and this was made evident by the reflective responses. For one, several participants described a change in the way they confront issues and work, as 'more meticulous', 'accurate', 'analytical thinking' and 'always questioning and reflecting'. According to a Jordanian participant, integrating the action research component within advocacy work increased her and her team's motivation and focus in general.

> The action research principles motivate us to continue [working on these challenging issues] especially that are geared towards change. They help us stay focused.

Accounts such as that of another Jordanian participant reinforce the view that action research, if understood and applied well, can indeed become 'a habit of the mind'.

> Subconsciously the methodology has become part of how I think and articulate myself and deal with situations.

The *value of reflection* instilled into the programme and conducted at various points was most appreciated and quite new to ways the sector is accustomed to working, as the following quotes show:

> ...critical reflection forces us to think about why and how we do what we do.

Now I think differently and I look for everything and everything raises a question in my head.

The heads of organisations whose members were involved in the programme further confirmed that the skills gained by their peers were being noticed within the organisations. The quote below gives a flavour of one outsider's perspective:

It [action research] had a big effect on their personalities...gave them professional skills and team work and overcoming differences taught them to be flexible, pragmatic, and develop long term thinking. I could see it translated into the way they work in the organisation too. (Morocco head of partner organisation)

On the potential of PAR as a tool and approach to use beyond the scope of the WPIPL programme, a number of participants shared anecdotes of how they had advocated the use of PAR in their workplace with colleagues and other organisations. There was unanimous agreement that PAR would be a useful tool and that they would recommend adapting it to other country contexts and within other sectors such as youth empowerment and the disability movement. One participant said that she had begun to look at things more comprehensively and consider the bigger picture of projects and her role as an organisation.

There was a moment when the potential of PAR was also felt at the regional level. In the words of participants during a recent facilitated learning session,

'[PAR] opens doors for joint work' and '...we want to reflect why we are not seeing real empowerment among women in the region despite all our efforts... we need to understand why and work to change this'.

It is finally worth mentioning that there were some who did not feel that action had affected their way of thinking and working. These included long time researchers or academics accustomed to qualitative research or long time activists who had set ways of working and had not directly experienced the practice of action research. For INTRAC researchers and facilitators, for example, qualitative research and participatory approaches characterised by action research in this instance were not new to them. However, for one head of organisation from Egypt, exposure to this different mode of work had piqued her interest in action research as an alternative less confrontational mode of organising action in present restrictive environment for protest and advocacy.

Challenges encountered that could limit the potential of PAR

A number of challenges were encountered whilst applying PAR. The most obvious was related to unstable political contexts of some of the countries within which the programme was implemented, and their repercussions on morale, safety and mobility. For example, the insecurity in Libya put a halt to the programme due

to restricted mobility and inability to conduct fieldwork. The assassination of a Libyan female activist and a Congresswoman posed an added ethical concern for the protection of women engaged in politically controversial work. In Egypt, rapid political change at the time of the action research posed a challenge that was addressed differently: the question was adapted to suit immediate issue of constitutional changes. In Palestine, the war on Gaza put a halt on the PAR for three months due to widespread insecurity, low morale and a shift in priorities mid-research. When things calmed down, there remained mixed feelings about the programme's focus on women's political participation at a time where other priorities worried local communities. The key question raised here is the extent to which volatile political circumstances affect PAR and its potency, and whether PAR has the capacity to adapt to different and constrained socio-political contexts. As other authors before us have pointed out, political instability and local violence raise important concerns around access, risk, ethics and social positioning of the researchers and research participants (Busza, 2004; Lundy & McGovern, 2006; Wheeler, 2013). Whether using action research as a methodology to address development and social change (Burns, Harvey & Ortiz Aragón, 2013; Ortiz Aragón & Glenzer, 2017) or as a participatory intervention approach to peace-building (Johannsen, 2001; Life and Peace Institute, 2016), PAR in violent contexts requires negotiating the challenges associated with those concerns and adapting the research design while ensuring rigorous research (Busza, 2004, p. 192).

While the capacity of PAR to adapt to evolving socio-political contexts has been seriously tested throughout this programme in the countries affected by armed conflict, the action researchers widely acknowledged the benefits earned by it. Our experience points in the direction indicated by Wheeler (2013, pp. 49–55) to address those concerns and challenges. First, the relevance of personal relationships in gaining access to the field and generating trust while being fully aware of risks connected to manipulation and exploitation of these relationships, and the way these affects the engagement of research participants. Second, to ensure that community researchers are the primary arbiters of what constitute risk and can have an open discussion around it while collectively agreeing how to manage it. Third, prioritise building trust and relationships within the community over rigid forms of data collection. Finally, the social positioning of the researcher and research participants need to be taken into account to ensure different perspectives and understand the processes through which people engage or not in the research. While the capacity of PAR to adapt to evolving socio-political contexts has been seriously tested throughout the WPIPL programme, particularly so in the countries affected by armed conflict, our experience shows that when challenges were dealt with in such manner, the process of production and use of knowledge remained relevant and the action researchers widely acknowledged the benefits earned by it. Moreover, PAR is even more relevant as an approach in a region characterised by severe shortage of good quality data for analysis and policy design (The World Bank, 2013, p. 149). PAR would provide the relevant

missing information that could benefit society at large, even in countries affected by conflict.

Other challenges manifested themselves at programme level and internal group dynamics. At programme level, the most significant constraint from the perspective of participants was time. This was influenced by financial constraints and time-frames associated with an externally funded programmes. Another constraint was weak research skills among many participants that necessitated more support than anticipated. Practitioners concern for 'can we really do this by ourselves' was mirrored by researchers concern that 'inexperienced practitioners cannot conduct rigorous research and produce credible findings'. Some participants were unused to being part of the knowledge production more accustomed to the role of executors of the research. This suggests that the paradigm shift in knowledge production advocated by PAR will need time to be put into practice.

Intra-group tensions sometimes slowed groups down as did the challenge of collaborative work. It is worth noting that participants also highlighted a few constraining attitudes of the wider society during fieldwork, such as difficulties convincing people of the significance of political and civic participation and the lack of a research mindset. At times, it was difficult to convince people of the value of the research process in itself. Some were disinterested; others prioritised more immediate needs than women's empowerment and research processes.

Discussion and concluding reflections

This study has explored the potential and limits of PAR as a process to strengthen the civic and political empowerment of women in seven countries in the MENA region through the lens of the British Council's regional WPIPL programme. The findings that emerged culminated in interesting insights into how programme stakeholders perceived and experienced PAR. They confirm a widespread support for the use of PAR as a process that strengthens advocacy work and makes it more relevant, impactful and inclusive. They also suggest that action research could be a worthwhile tool that civil society actors could continue to benefit from indicating its positive transformative effects on individuals, groups and coalitions. A number of challenges that may limit the empowering role of PAR were illuminated and discussed. In particular, the volatile political environment, with outbursts of violence and conflict, can seriously hamper PAR. So what do these findings mean? We go back to the two core questions that this paper aimed to answer.

To what extent did the practice of applying AR to WPIPL mirror the promise of AR as per the theory?

As other authors before us have observed (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Reason, 2006), there are two main issues at stake in PAR: the development of practical knowledge through approaches that are highly participatory and seek to democratise the knowledge

generation process itself; and the use of this knowledge to pursue practical solutions to issues of concerns to individuals and communities, so that they can overcome those problems and flourish. Therefore, the practical value of action research is that it links development theory with practice through efforts of a community of inquiry (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). In the context of women's political empowerment, it can lead to the creation of gendered knowledge, which should assert itself as social and political reality (Farrell, 2014) while aiming to empower and create social change for and with agents of change and their communities. How did AR deliver in WPIPL with respect to these two main theoretical assumptions?

Democratisation and development of practical knowledge. Democratising the knowledge generation process assumes, first of all, gaining a deep understanding of it. This quick reflection exercise revealed incomplete or varying understandings of action research as methodology, often conflated tout court with qualitative research, focus group work and triangulation. There were also varying perceptions of action research among research community and practitioners. On the one hand, among programme managers and facilitators, there was more or less a common understanding of it, some emphasising the empowerment dimension more than others who viewed it as primarily a useful research tool. On the other hand, some participants were fixated more on the mechanics of action research than the 'bigger picture' goals of action research ethos and its guiding principles. This is a reflection of a 'project mentality' prevalent in a donor-driven civil society sector that, being a constraining mindset of donor-funded project recipients, narrowly prioritises short-term outputs over long-term vision and gains (Cox & Sisk, 2017). We believe that this poses a big limit to the potential of action research as understood by the authors of this paper. Finally, it was interesting to see strong appreciation for the reflection aspect of action research but relatively little practice of it during the course of the programme. This could be due to insufficient mechanisms for reflection put in place by the programme and a result of absence of a culture of critical reflection in the wider sector, political culture and educational system. Democratising the knowledge generation process will require practice of action research beyond a single programme.

Nevertheless, as highlighted in the first and second main findings, most researchers acknowledged the way in which PAR challenged previously established knowledge and power relations while expanding knowledge, enhancing their research skills and ability to interact with stakeholders. The researchers valued action research for having provided them with the practical knowledge that enabled them to engage with and challenge politicians and practitioners by engaging in new collaborative and horizontal modes and transforming women from beneficiaries into partners. In this respect, this paper provided practical examples of how PAR can contribute to develop context-relevant gendered knowledge and, if not to democratise, to at least challenge the knowledge production process and power relations, therefore showing how practice of action research in this programme did partially mirror the promise of action research theory.

Evidence-based practical solution to issues of concern. With respect to the second 'promise', the ability of PAR to provide solutions to women's problems and concerns regarding their political participation was not always evident. In most cases, the action research led to advocacy campaigns whose immediate impact within the communities or in the life of individuals remained difficult to assess in the short run. In one case, however, the ability of PAR to overcome some of the obstacles to women's political participation was clear. Indeed, in Jordan, building coalitions amongst women's groups and using action research to underpin a targeted advocacy campaign was mirrored by the victory, in 2016, in the parliamentary National Elections of the first ever woman outside women's quotas and the highest number of women MPs elected in Jordan (MacLeod, 2016). The wide range of activities conducted throughout the campaign points to the growing influence of the campaign itself in the months preceding the elections. In particular, it was the action research that raised the need to enhance community engagement in a way to address cultural and religious concerns while providing a focus and solid content through research evidence which enhanced the case for greater women's representation (MacLeod, 2016). The action research provided the evidence and practical guidance for an advocacy campaign to reduce women's barriers to political participation and to generate a greater ability to influence positive change.

Does PAR offer anything of value to empowerment and sustainable change among women and potentially other civil society actors in MENA?

PAR, within the context of the WPIPL, was found to be both empowering as a process *as well as* a tool that supported 'empowerment outcomes' – in this case, the advocacy outcomes (Fetterman, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000). Process and outcome are equally important and conducive to long lasting and meaningful empowerment of women in the public and political spheres in the MENA region, with eventual ripple effects into the private sphere. The skills and knowledge that women acquire through participatory collective learning inherent in PAR enables them to navigate unwelcoming political structures and influence change more effectively (Rea, 1994). Revisiting the reported outcomes that were catalysed by virtue of women's immersion in PAR, the table below reflects upon these perceived changes at individual, group and coalition/advocacy levels (Table 1).

PAR not only presents itself as a useful tool for supporting evidence-based advocacy that seeks positive socio-political change; it also offers a *different way of thinking and being*.[13] In the context of this programme, PAR indeed created a mode of work and space for reflection on practice not typically available in an environment that focuses on project implementation. As the evidence has shown, it also catalysed a collaborative work ethic and increased sense of ownership with its wider engagement of stakeholders in the research and in the action. By granting civil society actors a role as partners in the PAR process including selection of the research topic, data collection, analysis and advocacy plan as the outcome of the research findings, they were empowered with the right to be part of the knowledge

Table 1. Evidence from PAR: levels of change and reported outcomes.

Levels of change	Reported outcomes[12]
Individual level (transformation at personal and professional level)	• Activist as researcher is empowered as knowledge-producer • Research skills acquired • Evidence-base gives advocates more confidence and backing when confronting decision makers • Sense of empowerment • Critical thinking
Group level (transformation in cross-organisational, country-based interactions)	• Different way of thinking and doing advocacy fostered • Spaces for collective reflection created • Stronger sense of group cohesion due to collective ownership of issue and shared analysis of root causes • A shift from short-term project mentality to a focus on the long-term anticipated change • Systematic approach to identify 'real needs'
Coalition level(transformation in cross-regional dynamic around the advocacy issue)	• Collaborative work ethic • Increased sense of ownership • Systematic approach to producing evidence as basis for advocacy actions • Deeper understanding and respect for cross-regional commonalities and differences guide different actions • Positive energy and sense of purpose • Greater motivation in the possibility of change due to identification of 'real needs' and appropriate context specific remedies

production and decision-making processes (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006). The implication of all these by-products of action research is that initiatives that strive for socio-political change are more likely to be sustainable, effective and meaningful to women and local communities.

While it is too soon to gauge the extent to which these promising outcomes will translate beyond the lifecycle of the WPIPL project, this paper argues that these initial findings are important. PAR could be particularly pertinent in the context of current narrow spaces for civic and political participation in MENA (Hammad, 2013). Previous studies have confirmed the use of PAR has served as a 'pathway to invoke women's agency to contest unfavourable practices and systems' (Aziz, Shams & Khan, 2011), and it continues to be confirmed that its inherent empowering ethos and set of transformative guiding principles offer the potential to activate the role and collective impact of civil society actors and coalitions. In particular, the evidence has suggested that its application with marginalised population groups within constraining socio-cultural or political environments could

nurture transformative processes at wider civil society level in the long term, beginning with the individual and group levels (Aziz, Shams & Khan, 2011). Therefore, PAR may be the avenue for instilling a culture of reflection, learning and praxis among civil society actors, their organisations and the sector as a whole, pooling efforts towards change in the MENA region.

Notes

1. INTRAC has been contracted by the British Council to provide technical support for the programme in the implementation of the action research methodology, which includes capacity building for country teams in implementing action research, advocacy strategies, training on analysis, planning advocacy projects that emerge from findings, and support in finalising the reports.
2. INTRAC provided technical support in the implementation of the action research methodology. This included building the research capacities of country teams in the action research steps, data analysis, devising evidence-based advocacy strategies and report-writing. INTRAC also supported the development and distribution of Action Research Guidelines (INTRAC, unpublished or internal document) in both Arabic and English – the core resource guiding country teams in the action research process.
3. In this paper, 'participatory action research', as defined in the relevant section, refers to the overall process applied in WPIPL and includes both the research and advocacy components. The term 'action research' refers to the broader family of research approaches and to the specific research component or piece of research.
4. Martha Farrell was a civil society leader renowned in India and the world for her work on women's rights, gender equality and adult education. She was among 14 people killed in a terrorist attack during a women's empowerment training workshop in Kabul, Afghanistan on 13 May 2015.

5. Since 2009, the programme has formed more than 200,000 Active Citizens, https://www.britishcouncil.org/active-citizens. For more information on WPIPL, please see https://www.britishcouncil.org/society/womens-and-girls-empowerment/our-work/women-participating-public-life-middle-east-north-africa

6. The national action research teams were able to share experiences and lessons learned within the framework of six events hosted in the UK, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan where the teams received trainings on action research methodology, how to use it for advocacy purposes, advocacy and campaigning, coalition and network building. A regional newsletter was also shared among the British Council country offices and the local project partners throughout the duration of the project.

7. Practitioners learned by doing with coaching support from INTRAC both virtual and face-to-face, while the British Council coordinated and supported the country teams. This included country-based as well as regional training and mentoring sessions across all stages of the research and advocacy.

8. A space for interactive engagement, reflection and conversation between participants from the seven countries was made available through an online discussion forum. Due to a very low participation rate in the online discussion forum, the analysis of these data was not incorporated into the paper and semi-structured interviews prioritised.

9. This included a recent programme evaluation, facilitated workshop discussion groups and video documentary interviews with participants in 2014.

10. Only heads of partner organisations involved in the project were interviewed due to time constraints, providing insights from these two countries to this reflective exercise.

11. Participant from Jordan.

12. It is worth pointing out that changes or outcomes, as articulated by participants referred to the impact of the whole action research process, with the exception of one reference that specified the initial research design stage. To that end, they have not been linked to each stage of the AR cycle, rather focus on levels of change resulting from the overall process.

13. Source: Centre for Collaborative Activism retrieved from http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/ccar/define.html

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Tamara Alkhas is the Regional Programmes Manager for Society programmes in the British Council. With 22 years of experience in Society work, Tamara managed several development programmes including but not limited to Human Rights, Women's Rights, Youth Engagement, Higher Education and many more. Tamara also developed various concepts and proposals with many donors such as the European Union, DFID and the FCO. Tamara led the successful work on Action Research in 7 different MENA countries related to Women Participating in Public Life.