

**Participatory action research *with* and *within* community activist groups:
capturing the collective experience of Ireland's Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP)
in social partnership**

Abstract

The inclusion of community activists in policy planning is increasingly recognized at the highest international level. This article reviews Participatory Action Research (PAR) with seventeen independent Civil Society Organizations (CSO) that collectively comprise the Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP) of Ireland's corporatist social partnership regime for workplace and social inclusion. The analysis shows how the use of PAR can present a deeper and more holistic capture of the experiences of CSOs in shaping national-level social policy. By utilizing action-based research, the CVP is shown as an important agent in deliberating national bargaining outcomes (known as the Towards 2016 national agreement). The key contribution of this research is the reflective methodological considerations in terms of PAR design, execution and participant integration in the research process as a way to enrich and develop a deeper and more informed community of practice.

Keywords: participatory action research, Ireland, Community and Voluntary Pillar

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1. Introduction

Action research methodologies allow for the analysis of deliberative democratic processes *with* and *within* Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). In Ireland, community engagement in social and economic development has been the subject of debate amongst both academics and activists since the Irish government added a Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP) to the system of social partnership in 1998 (Dundon et al., 2006). The CVP is a mechanism which provides for a degree of regulated access to government decision-makers for those organisations that represent citizens who may be subject to labour market volatility. Social partnership itself is a process of consensus policy-making whereby government agree pay levels and social and economic policy with four key ‘pillars’: employers’ organizations; trade unions; farmers groups; and community and voluntary organizations (Teague and Donaghey, 2009).

This paper uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Chambers 1997; Kemmis and McTaggart in Lincoln and Guba, 2005) to capture the experiences of CSO members who, collectively, constitute the CVP who actively designed and implemented a new social policy, the ‘lifecycle framework’. These community groups actively campaigned for and bargained with government and other policy-makers, leading to a negotiated ‘lifecycle framework’ as part of the national partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*. The lifecycle approach works on the assumption that risk of social exclusion differs according to a person’s life stage. For example, children or older people can be identified as having distinct needs according to their life stage. Similarly, people with disabilities are recognized as facing lifelong difficulties across multiple lifecycle stages. However, while CSOs and the CVP appear to have secured a new social policy framework within Ireland’s national corporatist regime, it has also been argued that the community sector has been compromised in favour of economic stability and the promotion of a neo-liberal political agenda (Meade, 2005). Thus the issues surrounding social partnership and the lifecycle framework remain contested debates. Importantly, absent from this debate has been a robust empirical account which captures the processes and dynamics of CSO engagement in such government-led decision-making apparatus, especially from the perspective of community activists and CSO members.

This article reviews how the use of PAR was used to chart a holistic capture of the lived experiences of CSOs in the CVP of social partnership. A key contribution of the paper is the

reflective considerations that add to our understanding of PAR design, execution and participant integration in the research process. In order to achieve this, the article continually refers to the usefulness of various aspects of PAR throughout our analysis of the case. We are open and transparent about both positive and negative aspects of the PAR journey which are used to enrich a conversation about one aspect of the Action Research agenda. . In advancing this contribution the article is structured as follows. Next, a contextual background to the research project and Ireland's social partnership model is explained, including the specific role for CSOs within its CVP. In Section 3 the importance of an action-research agenda is reviewed; in particular the specific role of the PAR methodology. Sections 4 and 5 form the bulk of the reflective analysis and contribution. Section 4 develops a reflective contextualisation of PAR in terms of recruiting active and willing participant organisations, building trust and empathy, and considering the utility of the research techniques and analytical tools deployed. Section 5 integrates reflective views of the participants themselves, noting some important and practical limitations. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main contribution of the paper and how it adds to an on-going conversation in relation to PAR methodologies.

2. Context and Background to the Research

The larger study assessed the impact of the life cycle approach on policy-making for CSOs participating in the CVP of social partnership. The broad aims for the larger research project included: to engage CSOs as collaborators in the project; to understand the processes of decision-making within the CVP of social partnership; to explain the diffusion of power relations between CSO members and State agencies, both inside and outside the social partnership framework; and to disseminate the research findings to policy-makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics at a national and international level.

In addition the main research project aims, a brief contextual background to Ireland and the substantive policy role of CSOs within the social partnership arrangement can help appreciated the significance of the PAR method later on in the paper. A Ireland faced a unique and unprecedented set of circumstances in the 2008 to 2011 period when the research project took place. This period was one of huge change for the Irish economy as a whole. Prior to the global economic recession, Ireland was recognized as an economic miracle, a success story of the expansion of global capitalism via the post-war political project for European economic cooperation. However, within the space of several months Ireland had

gone from a country with the highest rate of economic growth and prosperity for more than a decade in Europe, to a country that suddenly required the direct assistance of the European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). While the global financial crisis affected most countries, Ireland was one of a few nations exposed to the vagaries of international capitalism, largely because of its over-reliance on cheap global finance to fuel a property boom along with minimal regulations to curb the activities of banks and other multinational organizations (McDonough and Dundon, 2010). The basis of what became known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ resided on several factors: easy access to cheap global finance, low corporation tax to attract foreign-direct investment, support from trade unions, and cooperative institutions such as social partnership to legitimize wage rates, welfare state reform and decision-making. A founding pillar of economic growth was the concept of cooperation and engagement with a range of social partners. To this end Ireland’s tripartite model of bargaining was re-branded as social partnership - first introduced in 1987 and which ran consecutively for over 20 years with seven negotiated agreements - was premised on voluntary dialogue between the State and multiple stakeholders (Wilkinson et al., 2004; Dundon et al., 2006). The latest agreement, *Towards 2016*, was agreed in 2006 and included the lifecycle approach with the incorporation of CSO members in the CVP¹. Importantly, cooperative engagement was premised on inclusion in decision-making that set wages, taxation, welfare and social policy change (Teague and Donaghey, 2009). According to Murphy (2002), social partnership was ‘the only game in town’ in terms of policy planning at the time.

Of course all changed amidst recession and financial crisis. Social partnership in Ireland has become associated with an unhealthy relationship between unions, employers and the government. Faced with extensive austerity measures and the potential loss of sovereignty with ECB and IMF bail-outs, the government officially walked away from social partnership in 2010 when they decided to impose cuts rather than negotiate reform through the institution of social partnership (Roche, 2010). A new coalition government, elected in early 2011, abandoned social partnership, although elements of the lifecycle approach negotiated in the

¹ The seven national partnership agreements are: 1987, Programme for National Recovery (PNR); 1991, Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP); 1994, Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW); 1997, Partnership 2000; 1999, Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PP&F); 2001, Sustaining Progress; 2006-2016, *Towards 2016*. In 2010 a public sector only worker agreement was negotiated, the Public Service Agreement 2010-2014 (otherwise known as the ‘Croke Park’ agreement).

Toward 2016 agreement remain active in relation to social policy objectives if not specific strategic plans.

It is with this background and context and circumstances encountered by the researchers and CSO participants, that we reflect on the PAR method as a tool to advance a deeper and more refine understanding of social policy decision-making in action.

3. Contribution of the Study to the Action Research Agenda Literature

The crucial balance to find in all research is that between the ‘replication standard’ of methodology, something that is so methodologically honed and explicit that any other researcher at another time addressing the same research question would find the same results, versus deeper, epistemological questions, such as what the study contributes to our knowledge of the social world. The significance of context is increasingly recognized in research which aims to provide some basis on which an organization can change or innovate (Gustavsen, 1993:161). PAR is seen to be stronger on reaching an approximation of the truth, at the cost of methodological sophistication: ‘there may be a trade-off between methodological sophistication and “truth” in the sense of timely evidence capable of giving participants critical purchase on a real situation in which they find themselves’ (Kemmis and McTaggart in Lincoln and Denzin, 2000: 591) . In line with much critical theoretical work, action research was chosen as a methodology because of a political and ethical commitment to the participants. Most significantly, it was important to work with *all* CVP members in order to generate a more holistic picture of the experience of CSO’s working within social partnership and especially the new lifecycle policy direction. ‘Action research aims to set in motion processes by which participants collectively make critical analyses of the nature of their practices, their understandings, and the settings in which they practice in order to confront and overcome irrationality, injustice, alienation, and suffering in these practice

settings and in relation to the consequences of their practices in these settings' (Kemmis and McTaggart in Lincoln and Denzin, 2000: 592). The PAR method deployed meets the three requisite conditions for pragmatic action research identified by Greenwood and Levin (1998: 152), namely: i) construction of arenas for dialogue; ii) co-generative research; and iii) the use of multiple methods and data sources.

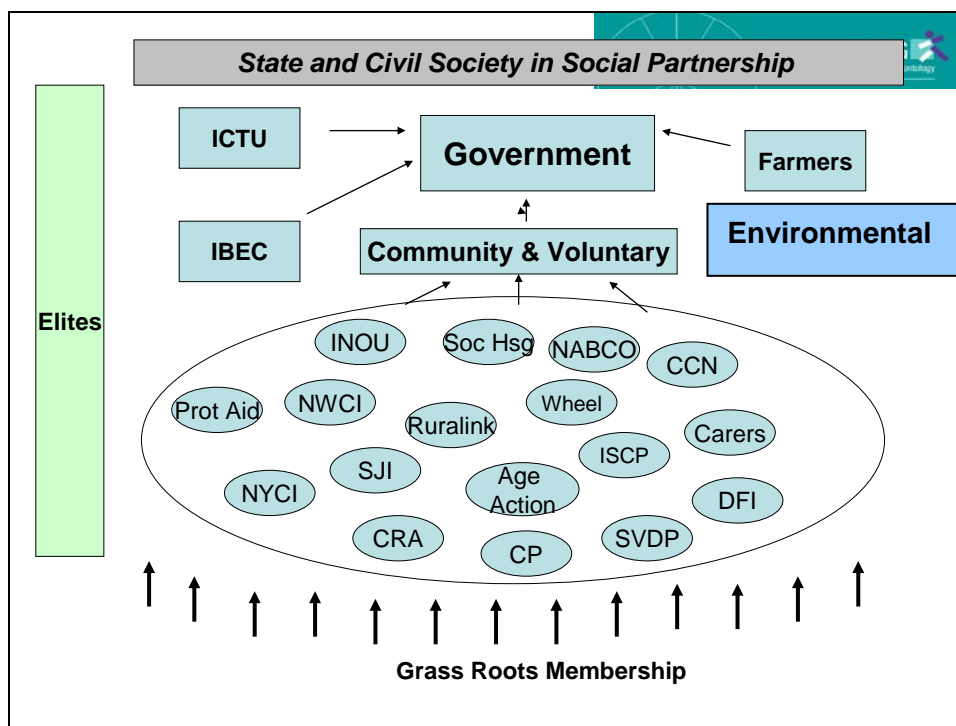
The transformative research design sought to engage participants in an environment free from governmental scrutiny. The final research report presented to the Minister for Social Protection in May 2011 was the result of a cogenerative research process. Neither participants nor researchers could have produced such a nuanced understanding of the experience of CSOs engagement within social partnership. The validity of the project's findings and recommendations lay not only in its articulation of the collective experience of CSO engagement in partnership, but also as an example of how investment in participatory action research can showcase the tacit knowledge and unique expertise of CSOs at time of national crisis. In this aim, our research contributes to action research that seeks to bridge the link between academic theories and what is happening in the real world. In this way, the theoretical contribution builds on the action research agenda advanced by Gustavsen et al (1997:145) with an explicit concern for 'the issues of democracy/participation in the light of the demands imposed by global competition'.

In contributing to this agenda the current research project had both a reflective and an action element; what Greenwood and Levin (1998: 130) consider as 'formative evaluation', in which there is reflective evaluation while a programme is in active operation. In this research the participant organisations are the leading experts on the lifecycle approach and negotiated the approach with government through the social partnership process. This connects with what Gouin et al (2011) discuss is the important 'collective' role of participatory action research, reported in an NGO feminist environment. Likewise, Aziz et al (2011) argue how

female ‘empowerment’ shaped the outcomes and processes of research around health and women’s rights within a Muslim context. Ataoev et al (2011), drawing on migrant worker rights in Norway, refer to related debates concerning inclusion and exclusion status in decision-making, or the professionalisation of CSOs in democratic systems of governance are important issues according to Fyfe (2005). The broader collective dimension of CSO engagement is also evident in Ataoev et al (2011) research, showing that the important role of bottom-up citizenship of CSO groups can facilitate dialogue for better immigrant societal inclusion. However in the Irish case much of this sort of collective community related action-based research has been conducted mostly on an *ad hoc* basis.

A primary reason for undertaking this research was to provide a robust and ethically sound research design which captures the complexity of CSO engagement in the collective institution of social partnership in Ireland. Previous research on community engagement has tended to conclude that the formation of the pillar has led to co-optation of CSOs against an emerging neo-liberal agenda (Daly 2007; Larragy 2006; Meade, 2005). The decision to participate in social partnership by some CSOs has been attributed to a realisation that when it came to initiating social development ‘other methods yielded little success’ (Larragy, 2006: 393). In the context of the current PAR project and the centrality of collective-based community organisations, Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the position of the CVP within social partnership, alongside other social partners such the trade union pillar represented by (ICTU) and the employer pillar represented by IBEC.

Figure 1 The Six Pillars of Social Partnership in Ireland



The six pillars of social partnership include the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), the government through the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Irish Business and Employer's Confederation, a number of farmers' organisations, a conglomerate of environmental organisations (since 2009) and the seventeen CSO members that collectively make up the Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP).

Table 1: Member Organisations of the Community and Voluntary Pillar

Name of Organisation	Mission
Age Action	Advocacy organisation for older people
Carers Association	Advocacy organisation for family carers in the home
Children's Rights Alliance	Umbrella organisation of children's rights groups
Community Platform	Umbrella organisation facilitating solidarity amongst organisations in the Community & Voluntary sector
Congress Centres for the Unemployed	Unemployed members of trade unions
Disability Federation of Ireland	Advocacy organisation for people with disabilities
Irish Council for Social Housing	Nat Federation representing social housing orgs.
Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed	Advocacy organisation for unemployed people
Irish Senior Citizens Parliament	Advocacy organisation of older people
Irish Rural Link	Campaigns for sustainable rural communities
National Association of Building	Campaigns for Co-operative housing movement.

Cooperatives	
National Women’s Council	Umbrella organisation of women’s rights groups
National Youth Council of Ireland	Representative/umbrella organisation for youth organisations
Protestant Aid	Church of Ireland charity
Social Justice Ireland (formerly CORI Justice)	Catholic (and lay) charity and think tank.
Society of St. Vincent de Paul	Catholic anti-poverty charity providing services and advocacy
The Wheel	Capacity building of C&V sector

4. Reflexivity and Contextualisation of the PAR Approach Undertaken

The Research Team, Funding Sources and Objectivity

The overarching research project aims presented earlier were part of a competitive peer-reviewed research proposal submitted to and funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). Prior to working as a post-doctorate researcher, the lead author was employed as a policy analyst at the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament (ISCP). This provided important contextual information about many of the CSO member associations who collectively constituted the CVP in social partnership. The lead was therefore known to these groups which helped gain their support and participation. Combined with this was a broader academic understanding was related issues of ‘community-contentious politics’ and the potential for the IRCHSS project to address gaps in extant knowledge around social policy inclusion and decision-making processes within social partnership. In terms of methodology, it was also argued in the IRCHSS proposal that much academic research had a tendency to view CSOs as ‘passive subjects’ who had been studied and scrutinised from afar, rather than as ‘active agents’ capable and able to influence decisions for themselves. The second author was a former trade union officer, now an academic at the same university as the lead author, and this added a specialism around social partnership as a bargaining institution. The third author is an employed researcher at the University’s research centre, who has long experience of undertaking research commissioned by community organisations. In sum, therefore, the research was not initiated by CSO members of the CVP, nor was it commissioned by government directly, but funded as a result of competitive blind peer review process. In addition to objectivity and academic credentials, the researchers also had a high degree of activist familiarity with the processes of community-based political decision-making and trade union and social partnership

bargaining. Importantly, upon securing the funding, the research was presented to members of the CVP as an opportunity for activists and researchers to work together to capture the unique and tacit knowledge of the community sector in improving policy for their constituent groups within the social partnership process. As researchers we made a commitment to listen to what participants had to say, to revise methods where appropriate and be inclusive and reflective throughout.

Research Participant Recruitment

Once the research proposal gained approval from the IRCHSS, the process of participant engagement and recruitment began. Like many real world research projects, stages and events do not always run as smoothly as often portrayed in textbook descriptions. Indeed, in the initial stages, CSO members were resistant to being 'researched' as a collective pillar. Furthermore, an offer to present the research proposal and subsequent data collection plans to the pillar was declined. The research team was instead invited to contact individual CSO members and to ask if they would participate separately. Should 'all' CSOs who collectively constitute the CVP agree to this as individual associations, then the opportunity to research the CVP as a collective grouping within social partnership might then be possible. This proved success and the reflection of this and other significant issues elaborated next.

Each of the 17 member organisations took part in a separate one-to-one interview, typically involving the senior officer or the person designated as the social partnership coordinator for the participant organisation. In using this approach we drew on the work of Palshaugen (1997) and others, in recognizing that there is no uniform approach to capturing the diversity of organizations in this strand of action research. It became apparent that previously published research had angered some members of the pillar, who saw research as at least troublesome and at worst destructive. All participants could see the utility of the proposed research and as long as the topic of the research stayed focused on the 'lifecycle approach.' No incentives were offered to participants to participate⁽¹⁾. As the formative evaluation progressed, some participants reported that engaging in the research process was useful for reflection.

Trust and Empathy-building in Participatory Action Research

The action-research process itself was highly iterative and the research team had to continuously engage in a trust-building process to ensure that all 17 CSO members felt comfortable participating. As similarly reported by Dundon and Ryan (2010), engagement in with politically astute activists was essential to help to cement a high degree of researcher-participant empathy and move beyond description and into a space where interviewees could feel free to discuss contentious issues. This was especially important given that members felt previous research was less than transparent with the CVP as a collective entity. In order for this research to valid, and to be genuinely participatory, time and care had to be taken to ensure that full membership of the pillar took part in the research. This was the first step in truly understanding the pillar as a collective entity. It was at this point that the in-built reflexivity of the PAR method facilitated that we listen to participants and seek their input in terms of refinement and design.

Building on the findings of the separate interviews with each CSO member group, explained above, it became evident that the CVP as a distinct entity within the social partnership institution was at times regarded as a construct of government by CSO members. It was therefore a mistake to view CVP as unified collective component in social partnership. Instead, we needed to reassess the approach and recognize this was now a study of 17 CSOs who may or may not have a collective standpoint on the lifecycle.

The individual interviews were completed by July 2009. Later that year, all participants were invited to attend an information meeting to explain the research to the whole CVP and the importance of this piece of research to the vulnerable groups affected by the lifecycle. At this meeting, the research methods were also demonstrated. This meeting proved crucial in recruiting participant organisations to later deliberations. When there were later (inevitable) disagreements about the content of the discussion at deliberations, the trust built-up through this iterative and participant engagement process proved vital in two respects. First, it allowed the researchers to 'retain integrity' by sticking closely to the research questions and objectives of the original proposal which participants were by now familiar with and generally supportive toward (Greenwood and Levin, 1998: 134). Secondly, the trust-building exercise allowed the formative evaluation to stay on track as social partnership hit ever more rocky ground as the Irish economic and political landscape became ever more volatile and unstable (McDonough and Dundon, 2010). Indeed, the micro politics shaping social partnership as a government-led institution was exposed as a major cause of what some CSO

members described as an 'elite consensus' that was at the heart of Ireland's severe recession. Although the system of social partnership was criticized, this did not mean the model failed to deliver gains for some other CSO participants who remained advocates of the principles of cooperation and engagement through social partnership. Given this is real world action research, disagreement and diversity among such activist CSO groups is not in itself unusual or surprising. The added value for this paper is that the processes and stages of trust-building through a PAR approach of listening and involvement maintained the equilibrium of the project throughout this period.

The participatory mode of engagement

Taken together we can show that careful participant recruitment considerations, researcher-participant objectivity and trust and empathy-building can help with a genuine interactive research process generating accurate, usable and meaningful policy-orientated research. The final design maintained key elements of the original plan to compare how different lobbies used the institution of social partnership to represent vulnerable groups. However, the participatory process allowed the research team to adjust the design in light of changes to the significance of social partnership as a policy-making with the onset of the global recession from 2008. Thus the mode of engagement allowed for refinement of the research design in tandem with participants. This allowed the research team to capture what they now saw as most relevant to the implementation of the lifecycle approach. A key to this participatory strategy was to allow each CSO member group the freedom to choose which lifecycle deliberations they wished to participate in. For example, all CSO members were invited to attend all deliberations. However, participation between the different specific lifecycle stages (e.g. older people or children) varied enormously. Cross-cutting groups attracted the greatest number of participants. By contrast, two deliberations involved only two CSO members. This was to be expected given that some life cycle stages were represented by only three organisations in the CVP. All member organisations of the CVP that could not attend an individual deliberation had been interviewed or had attended an earlier group meeting.

In the final analysis both participants and members of the research team were confident that the mode of engagement added validity and reliability as opportunities for subsequent inclusion and interaction to both design and outcome reporting was constant for all participants across multiple lifecycle deliberations. Table 2 summarises the final research design

including the mode of engagement and its purpose to the research project and to the participant organisations.

Table 2: Participatory Modes of Engagement

Method	Mode of Engagement	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	Individual interviews between one member of research team and one member of CVP organisation.	Provide information to participants on an individual basis and gather background information to inform the research design.
Information meeting	Group meeting to which all members of CVP were invited.	To provide information on project, feedback from interviews and demonstration of research methods. Brainstorming, grouping and ranking in two groups of seven.
Individual group deliberation	Group meeting to which all members of CVP were invited.	Brainstorming, grouping and ranking in groups from 2-6.

Data Collection Techniques and Analytical Tools

A number of different research tools were utilised to record participant interaction and general findings at each of the lifecycle deliberations. A number of techniques favoured by participants included: brainstorming, diagramming, mapping, ranking, and use of matrices for cross cutting and cogenerational data. All or some of these methods were used at each deliberation. Participants were invited to engage with the research questions using inclusive and equal means. Each participant was provided with a set of post-it notes and asked to list one idea per post-it note, in response to the following questions:

- What are the priority issues for each lifecycle group?
- What strategies are used to address these issues?
- What impact has the lifecycle framework had on participants’ organisational strategies used to represent their constituents?
- What potential has the lifecycle approach to enhance or undermine inter-generational relationships?

The ideas were subsequently placed on a flipchart by the researcher who then facilitated wider discussion of all groups in attendance at that specific deliberation. After discussion participants were invited to group similar ideas and rank them in order of importance. In this way, the relationships between ideas can be mapped. Where there disagreement existed on ideas, a ranking exercise helped to work out differences. The result is a dataset which includes a list of ideas, group decisions around those ideas, and a final diagram or matrix illustrating the collective responses of each deliberation on a particular issue.

Figure 3 outlines the evolution of data gathering techniques from the raw data to analytical tools used by the researchers and the participants at a deliberation meeting. The first photo (3a) shows all the issues identified as priorities according to the CSO members attending the session for the older people’s stage, typically through a brainstorming exercise. These priorities were written on post-its. Then participants were asked to consider headings and thematic clustering of the priority issues identified. In photo 3b the thematic headings have been added following agreement by participants (circled to the left of photo 3b) and priorities issues grouped by thematic cluster according to participants. Finally, in photo 3c, the importance and significance of the clustered issues were prioritised, again according to participants themselves.

Figure 3: Data Trail Using Participatory Action Research

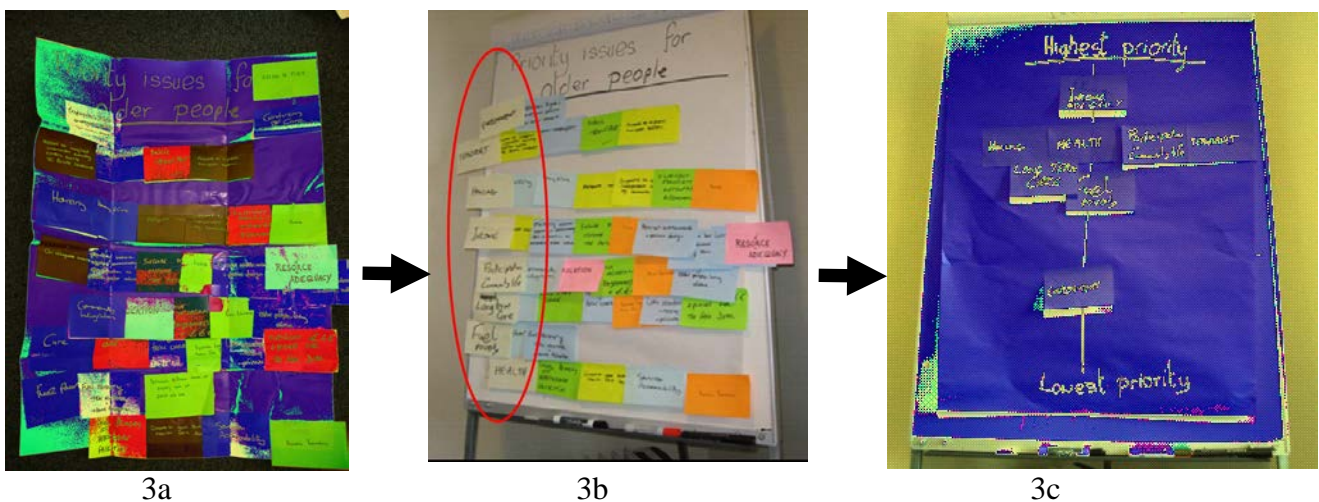


Figure 3 is one example of one technique in the PAR approach. Each deliberation meeting found different issues, strategies and ranking of issues according to participants concerned with each lifecycle stage. In addition to the notes and priorities for each CSO group, handwritten notes were taken at each deliberation by the researcher as facilitator. These notes were subsequently reviewed and verified by a different member of the research team. Summary reports of the research notes and CSO members priority issues that had been reportedly dealt with through the social partnership system were then circulated to participants, who were given two weeks to make comments or clarifications. This stage occurred in early 2010.

A further level of validation was then added to the analysis by forming a qualitative internal review. The research team met to discuss the research findings and consider any subsequent changes or amendment from returned from participants. No substantive changes were suggested by participants following their two week review period. At this point, each team member separately reviewed each lifecycle deliberation report to establish, on a question-by-question basis, the most significant insights and data cross-generational findings. For the most part, researchers autonomously identified similar themes as prominent. Where there was full agreement that a particular point was relevant, it was included in the final report. Where there was disagreement, discussion followed until the team reached agreement or further clarification sought if the issue was unique to a single CSO member.

5. The Participants' Perspective on using PAR

Feedback and reflections from participants were sought at the end of each lifecycle deliberation, and again when the project ended at a final results sharing meeting in March 2011. All participants received the final research report prior to its public dissemination (Garney et al, 2011). Those members who were quoted in the report were contacted directly to ensure they were happy with the context in which their anonymous quote was to be used. All participants were given two weeks to consider the report and include any amendments or suggest changes or corrections. Participant organisations who had engaged enthusiastically with the research process in earlier data gathering stages, again demonstrated their commitment to the process. In all, eight organisations formally responded to the report and actively participated in a final project meeting in March 2011. Participants made valuable

contributions, particularly in refining the implications of the reported findings of the research given the changed political and policy environment, as briefly described in Section 2 above.

Several participants stated that they found the sessions to be useful because it gave them the space to discuss the priority lifecycle issues without a watchful government eye that often occurred within the social partnership system. It also enabled participants a reflective opportunity to consider other CSO members' priorities that facilitated mutual learning. Some participants reported that the research process gave them a chance to tease out issues and they welcomed the opportunity to answer difficult questions. Importantly, using post-it notes gave participants more control over the generation of ideas and enabled those who were less vocal the tools to ensure that their point of view was articulated. Moreover, participants commented extensively that the research enabled them to reflect on achievements, air differences between groups, and enable mutual learning that typically did not occur in the CVP itself. In short, by participating in action-led research, CSO members were able to track their own thinking and to realise that there were common themes across other member organisations, concluding that as a collective body, the CVP was much more cohesive than initially imagined by participants themselves.

However, and as might be expected among the type of activist CSOs involved here, some participant groups were critical, and these point to important limitations and lessons for PAR methods. For example some CSO members felt constrained by the research methods used in one of the group deliberations. As the methods were designed to reach consensus, a small number of participants commented that the while disagreements were reported, the nature or extent of the debate during the session was not always clear. A minor concern was that some lifecycle deliberations included a small number of participants, which meant that views and involvement was limited to those with a vested interest in that particular lifecycle issue (e.g. age or disability). Participants from one of the cross-cutting deliberations felt that the research focus on the lifecycle approach limited their contribution, which was more interested in a broader Developmental Welfare State. Perhaps one of the more important practical limitations and a lesson to be considered for the future, is that the PAR method was found to be especially labour intensive for CSOs who have to operate with limited resources.

Some participants also remarked that given the research took place at a critical time in Ireland (from Celtic Tiger, to an EU-IMF loan in the course of three years), the research would be historically significant.

6. Conclusion: Lessons Learned that contribute to the AR conversation

Engaging in a participatory action research during a time of crisis for the institution of social partnership, the Irish state gave CSOs a chance to secure a collective position on a difficult set of circumstances over a rapidly unfolding crisis. While it is likely that these organisations, well used to managing challenging circumstances may have gained such control without the research process, it is extremely *unlikely* that the same organisations would have documented it. Lastly, given that the pillar itself was constructed by what was by 2009 an ailing political regime, the collective stance of community organisations on the lifecycle and the position of vulnerable groups in a deep recession would most certainly not have been negotiated, captured and communicated to the new government of 2011. The distinction between methodological sophistication and achieving research results that have an impact is the key to understanding the contribution of this study. Participants clearly articulated the usefulness of the process of PAR in providing pillar members with an opportunity for reflection, time out from crisis management. The facilitation of the researchers also provided a focus around which the pillar could engage their common interests, something that was increasingly difficult during a sudden onset recession.

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