

Research for change

Case 3

Salt is Life: Social movement learning in defence of communal access to Ghana's Songor salt lagoon¹

The point is not merely to understand the world, but to change it.
Karl Marx

Communities living along the Songor Lagoon in Ada, in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, have relied on salt-winning for their livelihood for four hundred years. Recently, this has come under threat because of attempts by government to relocate the people or expropriate an under-mined resource, making way for large-scale exploitation. Songor is Africa's largest salt-yielding lagoon and demand for salt for various commercial uses, including the petrochemical industry, is high. The Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF) is a movement of people defending their communal access rights and control of this resource.

When Jon Langdon began his participatory action research (PAR) study in 2011, he had already lived in Ghana for many years, and had married into an Adangme clan. Working with the Institute for Policy Alternatives in Northern Ghana, he had been actively involved in Ghana's anti-privatization of water campaign, and Ghana's community radio movement. His doctoral research on social movement learning led to an invitation to meet with members of ASAF at the local community radio station, Radio Ada – a major ally and partner in the movement. Their discussions extended over several meetings and they realized

that a mutual education process was taking place that they wanted to continue. As a result, the design of the proposed research was created collaboratively. Langdon's interest in a longer term study on social movement learning was reframed by movement members into a focus on "How do we achieve a collective understanding of what our struggle is and the best way to tackle it?"

Fundamental to Langdon's approach is that rigour of research methods is not as important as whose interests the research serves and how the research can help to change power relations in favour of those with less power. In the context of social movement learning, participatory research must be owned by the social movement itself rather than by academics who extract information to advance academic knowledge.

At the start, Langdon and his team, made up of Canadian university undergraduate research assistants, dedicated considerable time to informal discussions and collaborative planning sessions with member of ASAF. He notes how Akpetiyo, emerging as one of the women leaders in the movement, expressed her frustration at too much talk and not enough action. Proceeding to set the pace, she also signaled her desire to

¹ The case is summarized and adapted from Langdon, J. (2013).

“own” the process and to make sure women’s issues were firmly on the agenda. These issues included: building ties with Queen Mothers¹ who could help open up space for women’s voices at Ada’s Traditional Council; establishing a popular education program to share the history of the struggle over Songor; sharing information about government plans through this program; provoking discussion about what a people’s plan for the Songor would look like; and building and maintaining non-violent spaces of dialogue that would overcome internal divisions and focus on decision-makers at all levels.

From the start, many of these ideas have been accomplished, arguably because the participatory action research (PAR) was framed by and fed into the movement’s aspirations. The PAR itself has been flexible, progressing with the movement. For example, initially the focus of interest was on the division of the lagoon into small privatized lots, but later it shifted to how to deal with the external threat of expropriation. The reflection and dialogue process turned out to be a pivotal component in the successful suspension of the expropriation attempts. The documentation of the movement’s past and present was also crucial to their struggle. Storytelling, documentation and community validation resulted in “A people’s history of the

struggle over Songor,” broadcast on Radio Ada in Dangme language throughout the Dangme speaking area. The response was enthusiastic: “It is our own story we are hearing.” In fact, Radio Ada studios became a hub for Ada Songor Advocacy Forum’s (ASAF’s) open discussions and ongoing research. In this way, Langdon shows how PAR not only helps document moments of reflection like this, but adds to people’s ability to act. He claims that relationships are of primary importance to this type of work and are the basis of the quality of what emerges through the research, with people sharing stories and using these stories to change the dynamics of power to work in more inclusive and egalitarian ways.

Yet there are boundaries for the role of the outside researchers. Very early on, in community engagement meetings in the open air studio at Radio Ada, ASAF decided that the Canadians should stay in the background, but in the discussions about the movement itself, the Canadians could have a voice like everyone else. When it came to direct action, they would not be involved, but would document what happened, in support of those participating. In this way, the collaborative research process leads to a richer, more complex account because people build it and own it collectively. Action is taken by people of the movement, not by the external research collaborator(s). Or are these boundaries more blurred than these may seem?

² Queen Mothers are custodians of traditional authority structures and seek the welfare of everyone in the community especially women and children.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you assess the quality of this research? Consider these four criteria of quality: research design, participation, learning and influence.
2. What challenges are faced by an outsider in this kind of research? As a Canadian, how did Langdon gain trust and credibility? What are the dangers of this role?
3. How did he reconcile his interests in both “understanding the world” (learning about social movement learning) and “changing it” by supporting the learning in which the social movement wants to engage?
4. Are there any ethical issues that you might be concerned about? Or does this research appear to be more ethically sound than more conventional approaches?

Reference

Langdon, J. (2013) Collective research focused on change as research excellence. Presented at *Research for change: What is "research excellence" for civil society organizations and their academic partners?* IDRC / Coady Canadian Learning Forum November 12-13, 2013, Coady International Institute, Antigonish, NS. Available at: <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/handle/10625/52701>.

Further Reading

Langdon, J., Larweh, K. & Cameron, S. (2014) The Thumbless hand, the dog and the chameleon: enriching social movement learning theory through epistemically grounded narratives emerging from a participatory action research case study in Ghana. *Interface* 6 (1), 27-44. Available from <http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Interface-6-1-Langdon-Larweh-and-Cameron.pdf>

Langdon, J. (2012). Moving with the movement: collaborative building of social movement learning participatory action research (PAR) spaces in Ada, Ghana. In S. Brigham (Ed.), *2012 Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference Proceedings*, 216-222. Available from https://www.academia.edu/2095351/Moving_with_the_movement_collaborative_building_of_social_movement_learning_participatory_action_research_PAR_spaces_in_Ada_Ghana

Langdon, J., Larweh, K. & Quarmyne, W. (2014). "E yeo ngo" (Does s/he eat salt?): Learning in Movement from a 5 year PAR study of the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum, A Social Movement in Ghana. In *2014 Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference Proceedings*. St. Catharines, ON. Available from <http://journals.msvu.ca/ocs/index.php/casae2014/CASAE14/paper/viewFile/89/36>