Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as participatory evaluation and learning methodology: the case of "Arts for All" Project (2019 – 2022)

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the case study of "Arts for All" Project (2019 – 2022)

This article showcases the experience of using Participatory Action Research (PAR) to enable participatory evaluation and learning throughout the "Arts for All" Project. Unlike conventional approaches to evaluation that rely on external evaluators, PAR promotes participatory evaluation, in which the project participants and implementing team play a central role in judging the project's outcomes and impacts. Additionally, applying PAR methods enables the project team to practice planning, decision-making, and monitoring project activities in a participatory manner. The article also argues that the PAR methodology is effective in assessing the intangible outcomes and impacts that result from arts- and culture-focused projects. PAR incorporates innovative and highly engaging methods that account for the subjective voices and experiences of the project participants and team, indicating the type and depth of the resulting outcomes and impacts.

1. Background on "Arts for All" project

In partnership with Drosos, the Ana Masry Organization implemented a four-year project called "Arts for All" in Qena, a governorate located 600 kilometers south of Cairo. The project aimed to achieve three objectives: 1) strengthening government institutions concerned with art and culture, such as cultural centers; 2) working with children in 18 urban and rural communities to develop their artistic talents; and 3) spreading and promoting positive values in society through various arts.

Throughout the four years (2019-2022), the project contributed to:
- providing 5,755 learning and participation opportunities for children
- building the capacities of 139 volunteers (85% females) and provided them with over 210 volunteering opportunities in the project's programs and activities.
- Supporting 40 educational and cultural organizations, such as youth centers, private schools, NGOs, and cultural centers.

2. Participatory Action Research (PAR): a brief

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is shared research with people that brings the issues and problems to common consideration to solve and build on the knowledge of both sides (Swantz, 2015). This definition emphasizes that **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** is a cooperative approach to research, learning and action for social change, bringing together all parties concerned to work together to identify the problem, develop

the research methodology and tools, gather information, analyze, and produce results and practical solutions that respond to the problem chosen.

PAR creates spaces for the participants to work together in a repetitive and renewed cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action. However, these repetitive cycles are not same on the same horizontal level, but they escalate upwards over time to achieve a cumulative learning and change over time.

3. Brining a shift to how projects are planned and evaluated.

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as participatory evaluation and learning shifts the focus to addressing issues and problems identified by a group or community to bring about change, while conventional evaluation focuses on identifying the success of the project, judging if the project has managed to meet its promises from an objective stand. Assuming objective evaluation has undermined the subjective knowledge that the project participants and team develop throughout any project. They are capable to assess outcomes and impacts of the projects on themselves, especially if projects work on achieving intangible changes like the arts- and culture-focused ones do.

In that sense, PAR works deliberately on enabling projects participants and team to capture the outcomes and impacts of projects by themselves. In addition, the strength of PAR lies in finding solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower both development and community actors by working cooperatively to address and implement intervention activities and action plans. Implementation activities and action plans are then systematically monitored for reflection on the process, impact, and results, which may lead to other rounds of enhancement. Thus, PAR is an iterative process of continuous learning and turning those learnings into action. The table below exhibited a comparison of the conventional methodology to planning and evaluation and PAR methodology to planning and evaluation.

	Conventional methodology to planning and evaluation	PAR methodology to planning and evaluation
Who	▪ Top management team within the organization (Planning) ▪ External experts (Planning and Evaluation)	▪ Project team are the real planners of the project in collaboration with the top management team within the organization. ▪ Project teams are capable of evaluating themselves and the project (emphasizing their ownership and their self-critical capacity).
What	▪ Predetermined plans for objectives, activities, outcomes, and indicators of success.	▪ Jointly negotiated plans for objectives, activities, outcomes, and indicators of success with the project team and participants.

How	▪ Projects are contractual agreements that should be implemented as planned (no room for change) ▪ Focus on 'objectivity', using complex procedures, and project evaluators should be a third party rather than the project team and participant. (	▪ Adaptive planning and management of the project that addresses the changing environment and circumstances and enables the team to find best solutions and modalities to implement the project (there is a room to adapt the project structure and strategies) ▪ Self-evaluation: reflective and participatory methods to data collection and analysis, ensuring a key role of the project team and participation in evaluation.
When	▪ Planning happens before the project begins. ▪ Evaluation takes place upon completion of the project; sometimes also mid-term.	▪ At any point of the project. The project team decides when planning/re-planning or evaluations are needed.
Why	▪ Accountability, usually summative to determine if funding continues	▪ Empowering the project team and participants to initiate, control and take corrective action.

Source: Estrella, M., & Gaventa, J. (1998).

The final evaluation of "Arts of All" Project showed that Participatory Action Research (PAR) has enabled the project team to critically question and reflect on their engagement with the project activities, participants, partner organizations and local communities. The PAR has been deliberately contributed to bring a shift to participatory methods throughout the project planning, implementation, and evaluation. In specific, the PAR process challenged the hierarchical management structure, followed by the organization, as PAR created a space for dialogue and discussion that did not exist between the project team and the organization's management officials regarding all project-related matters. This extended to include the decisions made by the organization's management and their consequences on the project. The participation level also extended to involve the volunteers, as a young woman from the project's volunteers was elected as a member of the board of directors of Ana Masry Organization.

4. Revisiting the process of using PAR for participatory evaluation and learning

Two- or three-day participatory workshops were the main PAR method that was used to enable the project team to negotiate their questions and the problems they faced throughout the project, then decide how to collect, and analyze data to solve those questions and problems. In addition, those workshops provided reflective pauses to

revisit their experience with the project and deepen their learning. Annex 1 exhibits the timeline of the process of applying PAR within the "Arts for All" project and how it has been used as a methodology for participatory planning, evaluation and learning throughout the project journey (2019 - 2022).

The following section offers a documentation and reflection on the nine steps that have been applied to incorporate PAR as participatory learning throughout "Arts for all" project. Those steps and reflection could provide a guidance for developing similar PAR-guided processes for participatory evaluation and learning in development projects.

Step 1: Ensuring a buy-in of the organization's top management.

The starting point was introducing Ana Masry's top management and the project manager to PAR methodology, ensuring their buy-in to process and their organizational commitment to apply PAR as a participatory evaluation and learning methodology throughout the project. At this stage, Ana Masry's top management and the project manager agreed with the anticipated objectives and outcomes of the process, but they were questioning how the PAR process will be different from their usual working methods, assuming they already work in participatory ways with their team and target groups. Being participatory is continuum from only consulting your team in decision making, and it could reach the level of shifting power to the implementing team and targeted groups who become the actual decision makers. After multiple rounds of discussions and explanation supported by examples of different PAR methods that could be applied, they gave their buy-in for the process, and their readiness to explore it through practice. This openness to learn and explore the benefits of the PAR process was key prerequisite for ensuring its effectiveness.

Step 2: Forming a co-enquiry group and introducing PAR to the project team.

The project team was invited to three-day workshop to introduce them to PAR methodology and how it will be used for participatory evaluation and learning throughout the project. The first step of the PAR process was forming a co-enquiry group of the project team[1], who would work together through cycles of action and reflection to address the jointly identified issues and questions in relation to the project designing, implementation and evaluation. During this workshop, they have deliberated their understanding for the role of the co-inquiry group, how it would be managed, and how the decisions would be made.

In addition to the project team, Ana Masry invited external participants from two partner organizations to take part in the PAR workshops. Ana Masry intended to extend the learning process to other partner organization that could learn new methods that could

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[1] The co-enquiry group was formed of the project team members, including all project coordinators, technical advisors, M&E specialist, and the project manager. "Co-enquiry group" and "Project team" is used interchangeably across this article, depending on the context of writing, as they are formed by the same members.

be useful in their work. As a facilitator of the PAR process, I proposed to identify the external participants as "learning fellows" to set clear expectations and roles for them. Those learning fellows were able to take part in the PAR workshops to learn about PAR methods and tools, and they were welcomed to transfer those methods and tools to their organizations. On the other side, they were not accountable like the project team for performing project-focused tasks.

The involvement of those learning fellows faded, as they all dropped out of the process after two workshops. As retro-assessment of involving external participants into the process, I believe it was not planned in the process from the beginning, and it was not communicated prior to commencing on the process. There were not clear expectations and well-identified roles for involving them in the process, which could explain why they have dropped out the process quickly. PAR processes are lengthy ones, that require willingness and commitment to actively participate and engage in cycles of action and reflection.

Step 3: Introducing the power of "Reflection" and "Reflective Writing."

"Reflection" plays a key role in PAR methodology, acknowledging the usefulness of subjective knowledge that the project team acquires throughout implementing the project. Accordingly, one of the workshops was designated introduce the co-inquiry group to the concept of reflection, and how continuous reflection could improve their practices within the project. Although they all were able to grasp the concept of "Reflection", they exhibited varied capacities in applying reflective writing throughout the process. It was noticeable that those who were used to do creative writing and engage with performing arts, were more able to up-take reflective writing than others. One of lessons learned is that developing the capacity for reflective learning could widely vary from one person to another, depending on their previous experiences, willingness to learn, and their commitment to practice and apply reflective methods in their everyday life.

Later in the process, another workshop was designated to address the challenges to "Reflection" and "Reflective Learning" and introducing them to other methods other than writing to express their reflection, such as storytelling, recording voiced reflections, and photovoice. Broadening the reflection methods enable member of co-enquiry group to select their convenient medium to express their reflection. One of the key lessons learned is not to stress on writing and to introduce wider spectrum of methods that could enable reflective learning. It is worth mentioning that by end of the project the capacity of the co-enquiry group members to reflective learning have significantly improved to the extent that they all contributed to writing a reflective book about their experiences with using PAR methodology throughout the project.

Step 4: Building deeper understanding of the project and the reality of targeted communities.

The PAR workshops provided the project team with a space to discuss the Project's Theory of Change (ToC), which resulted in a deeper understanding of the intended outcomes and

impact of the project. Unlike their experiences with previous project, their engagement was not limited to implementing activities. In specific, the project coordinators highlighted that it was their first time to be engaged in a discussion at such level, which reflected positively on their sense of ownership of the project. Within PAR workshop, a communicative space started to emerge among the project team and the organization's top management, where the project team were able to pose questions about the project's ToC and get answers to them. Those deliberations about the project cultivated a common understanding for the project design, and its ToC.

On another level, the PAR workshops enabled the project to revisit the embedded assumptions of the Project's ToC, formulating questions that need to be answered to assess the current situation of the targeted communities, known as baseline study. After being introduced to basic concepts of M&E, the co-enquiry group jointly formulated baseline questions and designed data collection tools to answer those questions. Unlike being conducted by external consultant, the baseline study of the project has designed by the project team. The project team emphasized the process of the baseline data collection was an eye opening for them; and enabled them to develop evidence-informed understanding for the targeted communities.

Step 5: Redesigning the projects in light of the new learnings and emerging challenges.

The analysis of baseline data produced rich learning insights about the targeted communities, and the existing culture and social spaces in those communities. In addition, it provided data on the existing assets and needs of the partner organizations. Accordingly, the project team revisited the design of the project in light of the baseline findings, adjusting the project implementation strategy and activities to respond the needs of targeted communities and partner organizations.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread at that time, causing additional challenges to implement the project activities amid restrictions to gatherings. The activities implementation was put on hold for few months, which allowed time and space for the project team to rethink of the project design and their capacity to implement the project activities. The project was originally designed to implement set of activities of life skills training, creative expression, and theater in target communities by the local coordinators. The coordinators found themselves in a position to implement various types of activities beyond their technical capacities or expertise, which was not effective and did not best utilize the project team's assets and skills.

The project team utilized PAR workshops to redesign the project logic frame, clustering its activities in programs-oriented structure. This programs-oriented structured transformed the roles of the project coordinators to be more focused on implementing programs in accordance with their expertise and technical skills. For example, the team member who had previous experience with conducting theater activities became responsible for implementing theater activities across the targeted communities.

Step 6: Developing motoring and evaluation tools for the project activities.

In accordance with the identified indicators of the project, the co-enquiry group worked on developing monitoring and evaluation tools that could provide useful data to assess the quality of activities implementation, and the progress in achieving the project indicators. At this stage, my role started to go beyond facilitating PAR process to providing a technical advice for the team on designing tools for monitoring and evaluation. I was aware of my position of power while doing that, and the PAR workshops were a space for the team to deliberate and challenge what I propose. In addition, testing the designed tools gave them the power of experiential knowledge to further develop the M&E tools. Many enhancements were made by the project team to increase its effectiveness and suitability to its target participants.

Step 7: Reflecting in action and addressing emerging questions.

In this phase, the PAR workshops acted as reflective learning pauses, that offered the project team an organized process to regularly reflect on the project progress and the emerging questions about the quality of implemented activities. Those workshops were also space to reflect on the M&E data and discuss its implications on the project implementation.

In addition, the co-enquiry groups utilized those workshops to self-reflect on their personal experiences with the project and how it contributed to their learning curve. Doing that, the project team became more aware of how the engagement with the project contributed to their self-development and developing their career path. It is worth to mention that one of the project team members decided to pursue her post graduate study in monitoring and evaluating of development studies, and she designated her project to examine participatory methods to management in NGOs, as inspiration from the ongoing PAR process within the project.

Step 8: Assessing the outcomes of the project and reflecting on the entire PAR process.

In the last 6 months of the project period, the PAR workshops were designated to assess the outcomes and impact of the project. Through those workshops, the co-inquiry group formulated evaluation questions and data collection tools that could answer those questions. Similar to the baseline assessment, my role started went beyond facilitating the PAR process to advising the project team on how to assess the outcomes of the project. I framed my inputs as feedback on the drafted evaluation questions and tools by the project team. However, I should acknowledge that I did a final edit of the tools to ensure its clearness and consistency.

After the collecting the evaluation data, PAR workshops turned to participatory analysis workshop, where the co-enquiry group practices thematic analysis of the collected data in order to assess the outcomes of the projects on targeted children, volunteering youth, partner organizations, as well as the targeted communities. The co-enquiry group was

very critical towards themselves and their deliberations on the collected data provided a kind of validation for their subjective views and perspectives. They have accumulated wealth of knowledge about the targeted communities and the participants of the project. This knowledge was very useful to put all the evaluation data in a broader context and establish deeper understanding for the various effects that resulted from the project.

The last step was giving the space to the co-enquiry group to reflect on the entire process of PAR. They used individual reflective writing and group reflective thinking tools such as the timeline and retrospective storytelling about the critical events and tuning points that the project came across. They developed multiple drafts of a reflective books that tells their journey with using PAR within the project. The whole book was written by them, and my role was only facilitating the process of group reflection, providing feedback, and doing a final edit. Producing this book was a major transformation for a group that barely used to reflective writing in their practice. I cannot assume that they all developed the capacity to reflective learning and writing at the same level, but I am sure that all recognize the power of reflection to develop their practice and their capacities.

5. Resulted effects of the PAR process on the project team and Ana Masry

The final evaluation report of the project offers an extensive overview of the resulted effects of the PAR process on the project team and Ana Masry. Those effects can be summarized into the following points:

- **Building the capacities of the project team through action:** Participatory action research (PAR) provide a structured process for questioning, research, reflection and learning throughout the project journey, which contributed to building the capacities of the project team in applying participatory methods, engaging with local communities, collecting, and analyzing data, documenting stories of most significant change, evaluating activities, and reflective writing. In addition, the project team developed an evident self-confidence and willingness to reflectively learn from their experiences.

- **Empowering the voices of the project team and affirming their ownership of the project:** The PAR process posed a challenge to Ana Masry's hierarchical management. Like most civil society organizations in Egypt, power and decision-making authority are concentrated in the board of directors and the executive director of the organization. The PAR workshops created a communicative space for deliberations that did not exist between the project team and the management of the organization around the project activities and working in the targeted communities. This communicative space extended to include the decisions made by the management of the organization and the consequences of those decisions on the project. The below quote outlines how this PAR-enabled communicative space contributed to

empowering the voices of the project and holding Ana Masry's management accountable.

> *"PAR has established that everyone of us is a key partner in the success of the project, and enabled us to work as a team and express our voices … I noticed that PAR made us more willing to achieve and deliver results. In addition, PAR encouraged all of us to develop our capacities and acquire new skills … PAR has enabled us to express our voices and participate in the decision making within the project. We were not only responsible for project implementation, but we actively contributed to designing and evaluating those activities. Without the PAR process, we would not have such space of feedback and deliberations, and the non-participatory environment would have lasted till the end of the project. … In addition, PAR showed us to be participatory and actively engage with children and youth."*
>
> *~ Reflection of one of the project team on applying PAR within the project.*

- **Enabling a turn to participatory management within the project:** PAR process has enabled the project team to adopt participatory management and develop collaborative work ethos. The PAR workshops contributed to creating horizontal and collaborative relationships among project team members, regardless of their roles and positions, which got nourished when the 2nd project manager (Mustafa) joined the team, as he had a vivid believe in the significance of participatory management to empower the project team to participate in decision-making. In addition, PAR process enabled the project team to critically question their roles and find the best way to organize their roles within the project. As a result of that, the project team's roles got transformed from coordinating activities to managing a set of activities in the form of programs. This transformation played a crucial role in empowering the project team to manage the project collaboratively. Each member of the project team was entrusted with making decisions regarding their respective program. Each team member became responsible for their program, including financial management, coordination with partners, and advisory tasks. This shift had a significant impact on enhancing the team's confidence in themselves and their sense of appreciation for their experience and skills.

Lessons learned of the practice of using PAR as participatory evaluation and learning methodology.

- **Addressing the voices of the implementing team and the project participants:** As aforementioned the PAR process enabled the project team to get involved in the planning and evaluation process of the project. PAR workshops gave them a space to express their questions and seek answers for them, which contributed to expanding

the boundaries of their roles to go beyond just implementing the activities. They became more involved in the planning for project activities and evaluating its outputs and outcomes. In addition, the PAR process made the project team keener to seek feedback from the project participants in a structured way, which contributed to ensuring that the project activities were responding to participants' needs and aspirations. PAR contributed to shifting the power within the project to the voices of the implementing team and participants, but the level of participants engagement was limited to providing feedback and inputs. In my assessment, project participants could have been involved in the decision making during the planning and evaluation phases of the project, if they were involved in the co-enquiry group along with the project team from the beginning.

- **Genuine willingness and commitment of the organization's top management:** PAR is a lengthy process that requires genuine willingness from all involved parties, as well as a commitment of the organizations' top management. As aforementioned, the PAR process created a communicative space that did not exist before within the organization, which positively distributed the power dynamics inside the organization and made the organization's top management more accountable to justify and discuss their decisions with the project implementation team. Therefore, PAR process requires the readiness and willingness of organization's top management to involve their implementation teams in decision making and planning.

- **Continuous learning within the organizations:** PAR workshops offer an organized process to address any emerging questions throughout the project implementation. As aforementioned, PAR workshops enabled the "Art for all" project team to pose their questions throughout the project cycle, starting from the designing phase till the evaluation. This practice of posing questions and searching for answers ensured continuous practice of learning and reflection within Ana Masry organization, which reflected positively on the capacity of the organization to implement the project and achieve intended outcomes in an effective manner.

Annex 1:
Timeline of applying PAR within "Arts for All" project (2019 – 2022)

Inception Meeting **January 2019**	▪ Introducing the top management team of Ana Masry Organization (the implementing organization) and the project manager to PAR, ensuring their buy-in and their organizational readiness to apply PAR as a planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning methodology throughout the project.
1st workshop **April 2019**	▪ Introducing the project team to PAR as a planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning methodology throughout the project. ▪ Forming a co-enquiry group that brings project team, Ana Masry management, volunteers, partner organizations together to apply PAR within the project. ▪ Developing a manifesto for the group that outlines its role and ground rules.
2nd workshop **May 2019**	▪ Revisiting PAR and ensuing shared understanding for how to apply PAR within the project. ▪ Introducing participants to reflection and reflective writing as a method to deepen their learning. ▪ Discussing the project ToC and the questions that need to be answered to enable designing the project activities. ▪ Planning how to collect data to answer those questions (the baseline study of the targeted participants and communities).
3rd workshop **Aug 2019**	▪ Analyzing the collected data of the baseline study ▪ Reflecting on the project team experiences to engage with the participants and target communities
4th workshop **Dec 2019**	▪ Discussing the findings of the baseline study and its implications on the project. ▪ Revisit the project ToC in light of the baseline findings. ▪ Delivering training on reflective writing.
5th workshop **Jan 2020**	▪ Revisiting the project activities and their corresponding indicators ▪ Conducting rapid evaluation of one of Ana Masry activities (N.B. this activity was implemented first as a part of the project, then it was corrected as not relevant to the project)
6th workshop (online) **May/Jun2020**	▪ Redesigning the project logframe with Ana Masry and the project team ▪ Developing a shared understanding for the project (shifting from scattered activities to more focused programs)
7th workshop (online) **Sep/Oct 2020**	▪ Discussing the final logframe and agreeing on the corresponding indicators
8th workshop **Dec 2020**	▪ Developing M&E system and tools of the project
9th workshop (online) **May 2021**	▪ Reflecting on the project progress (Jan-April 2021) ▪ Revisiting M&E system and tools

10th Workshop Oct 2021	▪ Reflecting on the project progress (May-Sep 2021) ▪ Revisiting M&E system and tools ▪ How to write stories of most significant change
11th Work Jun 2022	▪ Reflecting on the personal experience with the project and its implications on the project ▪ Analyzing the data collected via M&E tools. ▪ Planning for the outcome assessment of the project (defining the questions)
12th Workshop Aug 2022	▪ Developing the framework of the outcome assessment ▪ Designing the data collection tools for the
13th workshop Oct 2022	▪ Analyzing the collected data for the outcome assessment of the project ▪ Assessing the quality of produced writings for the reflective book.
14th Workshop Dec 2022	▪ Co-writing the first draft of the outcome assessment of the project ▪ Co-writing the first draft reflective book

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