Call for papers

*Action Research Journal*: special issue on

Civil society research for sustainable development

Civil society organisations (CSOs)\(^1\) have substantial experience in research activity, even if this has not been formally structured or recognised as conventional research. Their involvement has pursued various aims – highlighting needs and experiences that are otherwise neglected, framing societal problems and research questions differently than in mainstream approaches, gaining legitimacy for contentious knowledge, and gaining a stronger basis to intervene in policy issues.

This special issue of *Action Research* seeks to bring together contributions on civil society organization (CSO) research for sustainable development. Articles should report on projects that have involved CSOs in research in innovative ways and that address the following thematic questions:

- What has been the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in research for sustainable development?
- How has such research dealt with different accounts of sustainable development?
- How have CSOs been involved? e.g. in designing or leading the research, in taking part, in using the results.
- How do participants work together to produce new knowledge, to develop new understandings and learn from one another?
- How is the research designed to intervene in policy debate?
- How do specific cases illuminate those generic issues?

**Background**

Various state initiatives have provided funds for CSOs to carry out research. According to the funders, ‘CSOs seek more active engagement to define research questions rather than just being recipients of research results’ (DG Research, 2009: 10). Indeed, CSOs have become involved in redefining research questions in ways that challenge dominant policy frameworks, especially on issues of sustainable development. Such opportunities have arisen in research programmes in many places in North America and Europe.

CSO involvement can mean key individuals who represent a viewpoint of wider networks within a research process. Their role has taken various forms – transdisciplinary research, participatory research, action research, etc.

The transdisciplinary character overlaps with Mode 2 research, whereby knowledge production addresses societal issues and problems, thus making research more publicly accountable (Nowotny et al., 2001). But accountability involves conflicting perspectives among stakeholders, who may differ about how societal problems should be defined, investigated and solved (Maasen and Lieven, 2006). Civil society involvement can highlight such differences and thus societal choices.

Participatory approaches have emphasised research *with* people rather than research on people, especially for mutual learning, i.e. learning by both the researcher and others involved in the research (e.g., Reason and Bradbury, 2007; Leeuws and Pyburn, 2002). Through greater collaboration among all those involved, action research transforms the relation between researchers and non-researchers, especially as ‘action researchers seek to take

\(^1\) In EU policy language ‘CSO’ has become a clearer, more positive name for NGOs, while also demarcating them from consultancies or businesses which may claim the status of NGOs.
knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers’ (Bradbury, 2010: 93).

Issues around sustainable development have been a primary entry point for participatory, action and cooperative research by CSOs. ‘Sustainable development’ provides an entry point for diverse perspectives and participatory roles in research:

Sustainability discourses, despite their imperfections, are helping to illuminate the essential plural, rather than unitary, nature of progress. In place of a single inevitable trajectory, we begin to perceive a multiplicity of potential pathways – and thus a role for explicit evaluation, active politics and deliberate social choice (Stirling, 2009).

‘Sustainable development’ has become an ambiguous concept, even a contested one. In this respect, participatory approaches have opened up debate on diverse accounts; competing perspectives on sustainability can be recognised and mediated within a research process (e.g. Pretty, 1995). Thus the concept provides an opportunity to open up normative choices for societal futures. Such an opening can be facilitated by a research process – the focus of this special issue.

**Selection & Referee procedure**

Contributors should consult the ‘Notes for Authors’, as well as ‘Quality Criteria for Action Research Journal’, both available at http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdManSub.nav?prodId=Journal201642

Full drafts of 7k words maximum are needed by 1st February 2011. In order to optimise quality, contributors are encouraged to send a rough draft or sketch by November 2010 for comment, so that this can be improved in time for the deadline.

A workshop on a similar theme will be held on Wednesday 29 September 2010 in London. Details are available from the guest editors.

**Contacts for guest editorial team**

For the special issue, the editorial team is led by coordinators of an EU-funded project in cooperative research (see www.crepeweb.net)

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**Selected References**


