Engaging Stakeholders and Identifying Issues in Participatory Action Research[1]

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) is a robust methodology for advancing community-driven inquiry, particularly within agricultural and rural development contexts. This second article in the PAR series focuses on essential strategies for engaging stakeholders and identifying priority issues early in the PAR process. Drawing on Extension practice and PAR literature, the discussion centers on trust-building, inclusive facilitation, and collaborative decision-making. Emphasis is placed on recognizing historical power dynamics and fostering equitable partnerships through active listening, transparency, and responsiveness. Real-world examples and scholarly evidence demonstrate how early-stage stakeholder engagement not only shapes research design but also supports community ownership and long-term sustainability. The paper also addresses challenges such as symbolic participation, engagement fatigue, and power asymmetries, and provides recommendations for navigating them. Authentic early engagement is presented as the cornerstone of effective PAR, with implications for agricultural professionals, community organizers, and researchers.

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) has emerged as a transformative methodology that bridges academic inquiry and grassroots community engagement. At its core, PAR seeks to generate knowledge and empower participants as co-researchers to address challenges that affect their lives. Within agricultural and rural communities, where issues of environmental justice, labor equity, and sustainable development intersect, the application of PAR offers a framework for collaboration that is inclusive, democratic, and action-oriented (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Israel, 2013).

For Extension professionals — those working at the intersection of science and community work — PAR serves as both a methodological approach and a relational process. Early-stage engagement of stakeholders is critical. It allows for the co-construction of research agendas that are contextually relevant and culturally responsive.

Without such foundational engagement, research risks reproducing top-down paradigms that exclude marginalized voices and fail to result in meaningful change (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Freire, 1970).

This paper explores the importance of engaging stakeholders and identifying community-prioritized issues in the initial phases of PAR. It reviews conceptual foundations, offers strategies for inclusive engagement, and highlights common challenges and proper considerations. The goal is to equip Extension professionals and researchers with a roadmap for launching participatory projects that are equitable, grounded, and impactful.

Why Stakeholder Engagement Comes First

PAR, by its very nature, relies on the involvement of those who serve as both co-learners and co-creators throughout the research process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In agricultural contexts, participants may include farmers, ranchers, farmworkers, Extension agents, youth, local government staff, nonprofit organizations, and informal networks such as grower associations or agricultural support coalitions. Engaging these groups early, prior to developing a formal research question, helps ensure that the work is grounded in practical, real-world experience and aligned with the community's priorities (Freire, 1970; Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Early stakeholder engagement enhances the relevance of the project by focusing on concerns that are meaningful and timely for the local context (Chambers, 1997). It also encourages inclusiveness by providing opportunities for a wide range of community members and partners to contribute their insights and experiences (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). By fostering commitment through relationship-building and shared planning, participants are more likely to stay engaged and contribute their time and expertise throughout the PAR cycle (Jagosh et al., 2012). Most importantly, this early engagement supports shared ownership, setting a foundation for cooperative decision-making and long-term collaboration (Franz et al., 2010).

With this approach, Extension professionals help ensure that research efforts are responsive, grounded, and supported by those most involved.

Moreover, stakeholder engagement is also a political act in agricultural communities, often shaped by long histories of Extension presence, institutional hierarchies, and socioeconomic inequality. It signals a shift in who defines problems and frames solutions.

Identifying and Mapping Stakeholders

Before any participatory process can begin in earnest, it is essential to systematically identify the individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions that have a stake in the issue under investigation. While some stakeholders — such as landowners or Extension agents — may be readily apparent, others are less visible yet equally influential. These may include seasonal farmworkers, informal local leaders, immigrant communities, or caregivers affected by agricultural health risks.

Effective stakeholder identification enables more inclusive and equitable research design by broadening the scope of engagement and preventing the inadvertent exclusion of marginalized voices. As Bryson (2004) argues, comprehensive stakeholder analysis can clarify who has interest, power, knowledge, or legitimacy in relation to the issue, thereby ensuring the project remains relevant and grounded.

Stakeholder mapping is both an analytical and participatory exercise. It can be undertaken by Extension professionals during the planning phase and revisited throughout the PAR cycle with input from community partners. Several tools and techniques discussed below can guide this process.

- **Power-interest grid:** A power-interest grid allows facilitators to categorize stakeholders based on their level of influence (power) and their degree of concern or investment (interest) in the issue. This technique highlights the need to engage both high-power/high-interest actors — such as policymakers or landowners — and low-power/high-interest groups, such as farmworkers or local youth, whose perspectives may be underrepresented (Bryson, 2004). By mapping these relationships visually, Extension professionals can strategically tailor engagement approaches with the understanding that different groups may require different types of support, communication, and facilitation to participate fully. For a clear guide with examples and templates on using the power-influence (power-interest) grid effectively, see https://creately.com/guides/power-influence-grid/ (Athuraliya, 2024).

- **Social network analysis (SNA):** Social network analysis is a powerful method for identifying relationships among individuals, organizations, and institutions. In agricultural contexts, this might involve mapping ties among growers, supply chain actors, government agencies, and advocacy groups. Tools such as ego-network diagrams or node-link visualizations can reveal influential connectors, information hubs, or isolated actors who may need targeted outreach (Prell, Hubacek, & Reed, 2009). SNA also helps to identify informal or hidden networks that do not appear in organizational charts but wield significant influence within communities. For example, a trusted farm supervisor or a community health worker may serve as a bridge between formal systems and hard-to-reach populations. For a clear and practical introduction to SNA, including examples and step-by-step guidance, see the "Social Network Analysis 101" guide: https://visiblenetworklabs.com/guides/social-network-analysis-101/.

- **Community asset mapping:** Community asset mapping focuses on identifying the strengths, resources, and capacities within a community rather than just its problems or needs. Developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), this approach emphasizes people (skills, knowledge); institutions (schools, clinics, nonprofits); and physical spaces (gardens, gathering places) that can support participatory research. Asset mapping encourages a shift from deficit-based thinking to a more generative orientation, reinforcing the principle that communities are not empty vessels but possess vital resources to contribute to their own development. For practical activities and templates rooted in this approach, see the NOAA guide on community asset mapping: https://coast.noaa.gov/data/digitalcoast/pdf/met-activities-community.pdf.

- **Participatory mapping with community members:** Beyond expert-driven methods, PAR calls for participatory mapping processes that involve community members directly in identifying who matters and why. For example, a group might co-create a visual map of local food systems, tracing relationships from production to consumption and flagging areas of concern or influence. This method not only yields useful data but also builds ownership and trust. When participants see their own knowledge validated through collaborative processes, they are more likely to remain engaged and contribute meaningfully (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). For a clear protocol outlining participatory mapping tools and steps, see the "Participatory Mapping" guide: https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/sites/default/files/gems/protocols/equity-participatory-mapping-overview.pdf.

A common mistake in stakeholder analysis is the unintentional exclusion of marginalized or "invisible"

groups. These may include undocumented laborers, non-English speakers, transient workers, or individuals with disabilities who are often left out of community engagement processes due to structural and logistical barriers (London et al., 2013).

Extension professionals must actively work to uncover and include these perspectives. This may involve partnering with trusted cultural mediators or organizations, offering translation and interpretation services, holding meetings in accessible, non-institutional spaces, and using flexible formats such as home visits, focus groups, or mobile engagement tools. Incorporating the insights of these stakeholders not only strengthens the ethical foundation of the project but often leads to richer, more nuanced understandings of the research issue.

Case Example

In a participatory research project conducted in California's Salinas Valley, the *¡Salud!* initiative engaged multiple stakeholder groups to address pesticide exposure among farmworkers (Arcury et al., 2002). Initially centered on farm owners and Extension professionals, the project expanded through community mapping to include farmworkers, *promotoras* (community health workers), local health departments, and environmental advocacy groups. These varied participants brought critical insights into exposure routes, protective behaviors, and barriers to care. Their involvement informed both the research design and the development of educational interventions tailored to culturally relevant concerns. The result was a more robust and context-sensitive approach to pesticide risk reduction (Arcury et al., 2002).

Defining "Stakeholders" in Agricultural PAR

Stakeholders in PAR are more than participants; they are collaborators, decision-makers, and change agents. In agricultural contexts, they may include a wide array of actors:

- Farmers and ranchers, who bring firsthand knowledge of production systems and local ecological dynamics;
- Farmworkers, whose insights are often underrepresented but essential in identifying labor, health, and environmental risks;
- Extension agents and technical advisors, who mediate between research and practice;
- Youth, elders, and cultural leaders, who carry intergenerational knowledge and influence community norms;
- Nonprofit organizations, including those focused on environmental justice, immigrant rights, or rural development;
- Local government officials and planners, who influence infrastructure, policy, and resource allocation;

- Informal networks, such as grower coalitions or mutual aid groups, that often function as de facto governance bodies (Bryson, 2004; Prell et al., 2009).

Engaging this range of voices creates a richer understanding of community dynamics and leads to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions. It also challenges the notion that expertise resides only in formal institutions, instead validating lived experience as a form of legitimate and necessary knowledge (Fals-Borda et al., 1986; Herrera & Torres, 2023).

Building Trust and Setting the Tone for Collaboration

At the core of PAR lies the principle of mutual respect and reciprocity. Early stakeholder engagement is not simply a step in the research process — it is the foundation upon which the entire collaborative endeavor rests. Trust is both a precondition for meaningful participation and a product of sustained, ethical engagement (Chambers, 1997; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

For Extension professionals entering a community, the first task is not data collection, but relationship building. Trust cannot be assumed; it must be earned through consistent, culturally sensitive, and transparent interaction. This is particularly important in communities who have experienced exploitative research practices or marginalization by public institutions (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Some of the most powerful ways to build trust include the following.

- **Showing up before showing results:** One important way to build trust is through presence. Extension professionals can demonstrate genuine interest and commitment by spending time in the community before launching formal research activities. This might include attending local events, volunteering at schools or food banks, participating in cultural celebrations, or joining agricultural field days. These informal interactions allow professionals to learn about local dynamics, establish familiarity, and begin building rapport with community members. Importantly, these visits should not have hidden agendas. Showing up without immediately asking for something helps signal that the engagement is not purely instrumental (Freire, 1970; Franz et al., 2010).
- **Creating safe and inclusive spaces:** The physical and social environment in which early engagement occurs plays a significant role in shaping participant experience. Initial meetings should be intentionally designed as welcoming, inclusive, and low-pressure spaces. This means choosing neutral and accessible locations, such as libraries, schools, or community centers, as opposed to formal institutional settings that may evoke intimidation or mistrust (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Accessibility also applies to the

timing of meetings and activities, which should align with participants' work schedules, family responsibilities, and cultural rhythms to support meaningful engagement. Facilitators must also attend to group dynamics. Effective PAR requires that all participants feel safe to express themselves, regardless of educational background, immigration status, language ability, or social identity. Techniques such as establishing community agreements, using first names, and inviting personal storytelling can reduce hierarchy and foster a sense of belonging (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Kindon et al., 2007). For multilingual or multicultural communities, providing translation services and culturally relevant food, symbols, or activities can further enhance accessibility and connection.

- **Communicating transparently and accessibly:** Clear and honest communication is essential to setting the tone for trust. Extension professionals should avoid technical jargon and instead use plain language that is understandable to all participants. Transparency around the goals, boundaries, and limitations of the project is also critical. Participants should know what is being asked of them, what they can expect in return, and how their contributions will be used (Chambers, 1994). Sharing information early and often, including project updates, budget summaries, or feedback from other groups, signals respect and helps counteract historical patterns of exclusion or opacity. When people feel informed, they are more likely to feel empowered (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

- **Practicing active listening and cultural humility:** Beyond communication, trust is built through deep listening. This means listening not only to the words that are said but also to what is unsaid — through tone, context, emotion, and silence. Asking open-ended questions such as "What concerns are most pressing for you right now?" or "What would a successful project look like to you?" invites participants to lead the conversation and surface priorities that might otherwise remain invisible (Freire, 1970). Extension professionals must also practice cultural humility, which is an ongoing process of self-reflection and learning. Cultural humility goes beyond cultural competence by acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge and being open to critique and growth (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). It recognizes that community members are the true experts in their lives and that researchers have much to learn from them.

- **Partnering with trusted community connectors:** One of the most effective ways to build legitimacy is through partnerships with respected local individuals or organizations. These may include pastors, teachers, community organizers, community health workers (*promotoras de salud*), or leaders of farmworker advocacy groups. Such figures often hold the social capital and credibility needed to introduce new initiatives and validate their purpose (Israel, 2013;

Jagosh et al., 2012). Co-facilitating meetings with these partners improves turnout and participation and helps mitigate power imbalances. When community connectors serve as intermediaries or co-researchers, they help bridge institutional gaps and ensure that processes are culturally responsive and community driven.

- **Demonstrating responsiveness and follow-through:** Perhaps the most powerful and often overlooked way to build trust is through consistent follow-up. When participants see that their feedback has been heard and acted upon, it reinforces the idea that the process is collaborative and respectful. Sending notes, revisiting topics raised in earlier meetings, and adjusting plans based on community input all demonstrate responsiveness. Extension professionals should also acknowledge and celebrate early contributions, whether by offering public recognition, hosting community meals, or sharing stories of impact. These acts foster a sense of progress and shared investment, which in turn strengthen ongoing collaboration (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

In many agricultural communities, particularly those affected by colonial histories, institutional mistrust, or socioeconomic inequality, stakeholder engagement is also a political act. Who is invited to participate, how decisions are made, and whose voices are elevated all reflect broader questions of justice, inclusion, and equity (Arnstein, 1969; London et al., 2013).

Recognizing this, Extension professionals must approach engagement not as a neutral procedure but as a relational and often contested practice. This means moving beyond surface-level consultation toward shared governance of the research process. In doing so, they contribute not only to better research outcomes but also to broader efforts toward community empowerment and systemic change (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Facilitating Issue Identification and Prioritization

After establishing trust and forming initial connections, the next critical phase in PAR is issue identification and prioritization. This process transforms abstract relationships into a focused research agenda, one that reflects the lived realities and aspirations of the community. The goal is not merely to generate a list of problems, but to foster a collective understanding of what matters most, why it matters, and how it can be addressed collaboratively. Facilitators must guide participants from individual concerns toward shared priorities while honoring complexity, disagreement, and diversity of experience (Chambers, 1997; Chevalier & Buckles, 2019).

Issue identification is rarely linear. It unfolds through conversation, story-sharing, debate, and reflection. Extension professionals must create space for these processes to occur organically, while also providing structure to help the group move toward actionable focus areas. Rather than prescribing a preset agenda, facilitators should act as guides and offer tools, questions, and practices that support inclusive dialogue. This approach honors the epistemological stance of PAR: that communities already possess insight into their challenges and that the research process should amplify, not replace, that wisdom (Fals-Borda et al., 1986; Kindon et al., 2007).

Several participatory techniques are particularly effective in helping groups surface and refine issues. These tools support different modes of expression (i.e., verbal, visual, experiential) and can be adapted to fit cultural or contextual needs. Common participatory tools for identifying issues include the following.

- **Problem tree analysis:** Problem tree analysis helps participants identify root causes, manifestations, and consequences of a central issue. For example, if a group raises concerns about declining crop yields, the tree might uncover contributing factors such as soil degradation, lack of irrigation infrastructure, or pest outbreaks. This method fosters systems thinking and helps reveal interconnections among technical, social, and environmental dimensions (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). For a practical guide and visual examples of how to use this method, visit https://mspguide.org/2022/03/18/problem-tree/.
- **Solution tree analysis:** A natural counterpart to the problem tree, solution tree analysis focuses on envisioning responses. Participants identify practical strategies and potential interventions, as well as the possible ripple effects of these actions. This forward-looking approach supports empowerment by shifting attention from barriers to opportunities. For a practical guide that connects the problem tree analysis process with the development of a solution tree, including clear steps and visual examples, see https://cafod.azurewebsites.net/QuickGuidetoProblemAnalysis.pdf.
- **Dot-voting and ranking:** Once a list of concerns has been generated, simple tools such as dot-voting (using stickers, markers, or tokens) allow participants to prioritize issues in a democratic and visually accessible way. Each person receives a fixed number of votes and applies them to the concerns they find most urgent or impactful. This process is fast, transparent, inclusive, and particularly helpful in groups with varying literacy levels (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). For an overview of how dot-voting works and tips for effective facilitation, see https://www.nngroup.com/articles/dot-voting/.
- **Photovoice and storytelling:** Some participants may feel more comfortable expressing their concerns through images or narratives rather than discussion. Photovoice invites individuals to take photographs that capture issues from their perspective and then share the meaning behind the images in group dialogue (Wang & Burris, 1997). Similarly, storytelling circles provide a culturally grounded and emotionally resonant way to surface priorities. These techniques can reveal nuances that might be missed in more structured discussions. For a deeper look at the Photovoice method, including practical steps and examples, see https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-health-equity/photovoice.

Effective facilitation is key to ensuring that the issue identification process is equitable. In any group, some individuals may be less likely to speak up in public forums. Others may dominate conversations, intentionally or not. Facilitators must actively counteract these dynamics. The following strategies can be used.

- **Small-group breakouts:** These allow quieter participants to engage without the pressure of a large audience.
- **Rotating spokespeople:** Groups appoint different individuals to share back their ideas, giving more people a voice.
- **Visual aids and hands-on activities:** These support engagement across language and literacy levels.
- **Anonymous input tools:** These include tools such as comment boxes or surveys, which allow people to contribute without speaking publicly.

Facilitators should also be prepared to pause or redirect discussions if power imbalances emerge, naming and navigating these dynamics openly when appropriate. A trained facilitator can play a critical role in creating space for all voices, recognizing subtle power dynamics, and ensuring that the process remains inclusive and constructive. As Wallerstein and Duran (2010) note, addressing inequity in process is just as important as addressing it in content. A successful issue identification phase produces several key outcomes:

- A shared and clearly articulated research focus that resonates across the stakeholder group;
- An understanding of differences in how the issue is experienced, influenced by roles, identities, or access to resources;
- A sense of group ownership over both the process and the emerging agenda;
- Momentum and motivation to proceed to the co-design and action phases of PAR.

These outcomes are not merely logistical — they reflect the social and personal work of coming into alignment as a community. When participants feel that their voices helped shape the direction of the project, their commitment and creativity increase exponentially (Jagosh et al., 2012).

Case Example

In Mozambique, a participatory mapping process was used as part of a water management initiative involving farmers, irrigation association members, local officials, and Extension agents. Stakeholders collaboratively identified infrastructure failures in the local irrigation scheme, including issues with drainage that had led to flash flooding and waterlogging across nearly 17 hectares of farmland (Mdemu et al., 2023). In addition, prolonged inundation contributed to salinization in about 24 hectares of cropland, significantly reducing productivity. By visually mapping irrigation infrastructure and overlaying stakeholder experiences, the process enabled participants to pinpoint high-risk areas and collectively design targeted interventions. This example illustrates how participatory mapping within a PAR framework can uncover critical environmental challenges and improve stormwater management planning in agricultural systems (Mdemu et al., 2023; de Vente et al., 2016).

Using dot-voting and small-group dialogue, the group prioritized one issue: flooding in vegetable fields tied to upstream drainage systems. This shared concern became the starting point for collaborative problem-solving, eventually leading to co-designed interventions such as improved culvert placement and public education campaigns. This case illustrates the power of participatory tools and inclusive facilitation in identifying issues that cut across sectors and interest groups, thereby broadening the impact and legitimacy of the research.

Navigating Challenges

While early-stage stakeholder engagement in PAR offers tremendous promise, it also presents significant challenges. Even with the best intentions, efforts to build inclusive partnerships can be derailed by structural inequities, historical mistrust, communication barriers, or logistical constraints. Recognizing these challenges is essential — not as a reason to retreat from participatory approaches, but as an invitation to deepen the ethical and practical commitments that PAR requires (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Common challenges include the following.

- **Symbolic participation:** One of the most persistent risks in participatory initiatives is symbolic or tokenistic participation. This occurs when community members are invited to meetings or asked for feedback but are excluded from real influence over decisions. In such cases, engagement may feel more like performance than partnership, ultimately leading to disillusionment and disengagement (Arnstein, 1969). To prevent this, Extension professionals must ensure that community voices are incorporated meaningfully throughout the process. This process comprises: co-developing research questions with stakeholders; sharing decision-making power over

methods and timelines; and involving participants in interpreting results and developing action steps. Embedding feedback loops, such as checking back with the group before moving forward, reinforces shared ownership and accountability.

- **Uneven power dynamics:** In any group, some stakeholders may wield more influence due to their status, language fluency, familiarity with public meetings, or access to resources. Others, such as migrant workers, youth, or non-English speakers, may be less comfortable or practiced in such settings. Facilitators must actively design engagement strategies that elevate underrepresented voices. This might include: using paired or small-group formats to encourage more equitable participation; asking more dominant voices to "step back" to make space for others; providing interpretation and translation services; and rotating facilitation roles to distribute power. Effective PAR does not eliminate power differences; rather, it acknowledges and addresses them transparently to create more just processes and outcomes (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Kindon et al., 2007).

- **Engagement fatigue:** Many communities — particularly those who have experienced repeated consultations or pilot programs with little follow-through — suffer from engagement fatigue. In such contexts, skepticism may run high. Participants may question whether this project will be any different or whether their time and input will be respected. Extension professionals can counteract fatigue by demonstrating continuity with previous efforts (e.g., "Here's how this builds on what you did before"), highlighting early wins and tangible results, clarifying expectations around time commitment and decision-making, and being transparent about what the project can and cannot achieve. Celebrating progress, even in small ways, helps participants see that their involvement matters and produces results (Franz et al., 2010).

- **Unclear expectations:** Another common challenge is ambiguity around roles, responsibilities, and outcomes. When participants are unsure of what is expected, or what they can expect in return, confusion and frustration may emerge. This is particularly problematic when participation involves significant time or labor commitments, such as attending multiple meetings or collecting community data.

To address this, Extension professionals should co-create "group agreements" or partnership charters with participants at the outset. These agreements can outline meeting norms and facilitation structures, ways decisions will be made (e.g., consensus, majority vote), time commitments and meeting frequency, ways in which data and results will be shared and used, and principles for conflict resolution and accountability. These pacts should be seen as living documents that are revisited and revised

as needed. They help build shared expectations and provide a framework for navigating tensions when they arise (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019).

Many Extension professionals face institutional pressures that can complicate participatory engagement. These might include grant timelines, reporting requirements, academic publishing norms, or mandates from funders or state agencies. Such pressures may conflict with the slower, iterative, and community-driven pace of PAR. When institutions support rather than constrain participatory approaches, the outcomes are not only more democratic but often more sustainable and impactful (Israel, 2013; Jagosh et al., 2012).

Above all, engaging in PAR requires humility. Even the most experienced practitioners will make mistakes, misread dynamics, or face setbacks. What matters is a willingness to listen, learn, and adapt. Facilitators must be open to critique, responsive to feedback, and transparent about limitations. When community members see that professionals are committed to growth and collaboration — not control — they are more likely to remain engaged and to extend grace in moments of tension. As Freire (1970) reminds us, dialogue is not just a method; it is a stance. It requires that we approach others not as objects of inquiry, but as co-creators of knowledge, meaning, and transformation.

In PAR, early engagement is essential, but it is only the beginning. The quality of relationships established during the initial stakeholder identification and trust-building phase has ripple effects throughout the research process. These early interactions shape the scope of inquiry, determine the balance of power, and influence the overall success and sustainability of the project (Chambers, 1997; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

Importantly, stakeholder engagement should not be treated as a one-time event or discrete activity. Rather, it must be understood as a continuous practice that evolves with the needs, priorities, and relationships within the community. Ongoing reflection, adaptation, and co-learning are hallmarks of strong PAR practice and are vital to maintaining trust and relevance (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

To support long-term engagement, Extension professionals and researchers should work with community partners to build structures that promote shared governance and ongoing dialogue. These may include community advisory boards or steering committees with clear roles and rotating membership; regular check-ins and feedback loops, such as listening sessions or reflection retreats; collaborative evaluation processes that include participant-defined indicators of success; and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that articulate shared goals, commitments, and resources. These mechanisms

institutionalize participation and help guard against drift toward extractive or hierarchical practices over time (Franz et al., 2010; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Effective PAR requires not just participation, but capacity-building, particularly for community members who may be new to research. Leadership development ensures that power is distributed and that the research process becomes a catalyst for broader community empowerment. It also creates pathways for residents to carry the work forward independently after the formal project ends (Israel, 2013; Jagosh et al., 2012).

When done properly, PAR is more than just a research approach. It becomes a vehicle for collective power-building and systemic transformation. By centering marginalized voices, questioning dominant assumptions, and grounding inquiry in lived experience, PAR can help communities challenge entrenched inequities in agriculture, labor, health, and environmental policy (London et al., 2013).

For Extension professionals, this means recognizing the societal dimensions of their work and aligning their methods with values of justice, inclusion, and co-responsibility. This alignment requires ongoing critical reflection. Who is being heard? Who is missing? Whose knowledge counts? Whose priorities drive action? It also requires advocating for institutional change — educating peers, funders, and administrators about the time, resources, and relational labor that participatory approaches demand.

Conclusion

Stakeholder engagement and issue identification are not preliminary checkboxes in PAR; they are the ethical, relational, and strategic foundation upon which the entire process is built. When Extension professionals approach these early phases with intentionality, humility, and a commitment to equity, they unlock the full transformative potential of PAR.

From mapping stakeholders and building trust to facilitating issue identification and navigating power dynamics, early engagement determines whether a project will be relevant, inclusive, and sustainable. Authentic engagement is not only about who is at the table; it is about how the table is set, who gets to speak, and how decisions are made.

The benefits of this approach are clear: stronger relationships, more meaningful data, greater participant ownership, and more durable outcomes. Moreover, when PAR is done well, it extends beyond research to become a mode of collective inquiry and action that reshapes communities and institutions alike.

For Extension professionals committed to justice and sustainability in agriculture and rural development, this participatory ethos is essential. It reflects a deeper recognition that expertise is shared, solutions are co-created, and the path to lasting change begins with listening, learning, and walking alongside communities from the very start.

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