

# International education for action research: the Bamenda model

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## Introduction

This article describes an instance of fusion of cultural traditions and a step toward international education for action research. Action research is a broad movement with diversity in purpose, theoretical frameworks, disciplines, professions and industries, as well as variety arising from geography, language and culture. Research participants often develop their own way of doing action research, specific to particular situations. We use models to simplify reality, to make things easier to understand and to explain what happens. Models are not true, but may be useful for some purposes. Various action research models have arisen for teaching, planning, reflecting and reporting. The variety of models reflects diversity in action research. The Bamenda model is an example of the coming together of streams of knowledge from different action research traditions and applications, to support and develop an African form.

## Literature review

The action research family includes a wide range of approaches and practices, grounded in different traditions, philosophical and psychological assumptions and pursuing different political commitments (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b). Action research is a broad movement with many beginnings. There is not one coherent history of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b). Yoland Wadsworth identified about 40 related streams (Wadsworth, 2002). A few of these are action research, learning, and science, developmental action research,

developmental evaluation, participatory action research collaborative research and inquiry, reflective practice, learning organisations, process consultation and management, applied anthropology, total systems improvement, continuous improvement, and soft systems. The term action inquiry (Tripp, 2003) is used to refer to the broad movement.

People in the various streams use different terms for the same thing, or the same terms for different things. This should not surprise us when we consider that the streams that make up the action inquiry movement arose in various languages, professions, and situations for a range of purposes.

There are many ways to categorise the us streams of action inquiry. Daniel Selener identified four approaches related to professional fields: community development, organizational development, education and agriculture (Selener, 1997). We might add action research in health. There are important overlaps, similarities and differences among action research in these fields.

Elizabeth Hart and Meg Bond arrange types of action research along a political continuum, from experimental action research, with high levels of researcher control, at one end, through organizational and professionalizing action research to empowering action research with bottom-up control, at the other end [Hart, 1994 #16].

Several writers (Grundy, 1988; Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Masters, 1995; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990; McKernan, 1991) classify action research into three main types. Though their typologies are not completely consistent, there is a general correspondence. Technical action research uses a positivist, scientific frame of reference. Action research is seen as a method of solving problems. Projects tend to be instigated and managed by researchers seen as skilled experts. Technical action research promotes efficient and productive practice. It includes experimental action research (Hart & Bond, 1994) leading to the accumulation of predictive knowledge to refine existing theories in an essentially deductive process.

Most action research projects are probably practical action research, which takes a pragmatic approach to solving practical problems, often arising in professional practice. Practical action research may employ an expert action researcher collaborating with a set of people recognised as 'owning' the problem or situation to be improved, or may be undertaken by professionals researching their own practice. It enables practitioners to gain a new understanding of their actions, and fosters the development of autonomous and reflective practice. Over time, practitioners gain skills and rely less on specialist researchers. Collaborative action research often (but not always) uses systems theory. Hart and Bond divide this into two types, organizational (involving organizational development) and professionalizing (building autonomous reflective practice) (Hart & Bond, 1994).

Emancipative action research often employs a critical perspective to address issues of social change and emancipation. This way of working with and relating to others, promotes liberation and critical consciousness in participating actors, which shows itself in political, as well as practical, action to improve the lives of disadvantaged people. Emancipative action research projects have twin goals. The research aim is to reduce the gap between the problems experienced by disadvantaged people in specific settings, and the theory by which they understand and explain their situation. This is a consciousness raising process that builds local theory. The action aim is to enable and empower people to take strategic and effective action to improve their lives and liberate themselves from oppression. Emancipative action research is often informed by critical theory, and is highly participative.

The three types of action research do not differ in the research methods used to collect and analyse data, but in the purposes of the research, and the social and power relationships between the actors and researchers. There is a continuum of participation across the three types, from the differentiated roles and recognition of the researcher as expert in technical action research to the highly participative and shared roles of empowering research.

Diversity in action research stems from cultural traditions, national and local situations, intellectual traditions in universities and schools, professional knowledge and practices, and

also because action research can be emergent. When participants own the research, they will often develop their own way of doing action research, specific to a particular situation (Coughlan & Collins, 2001) or way of knowing. These local ways are often developments or elaborations of models learned in formal education and through experience. As they are applied in participatory or collaborative practice, models are often transformed or elaborated. This process produces new models reflecting the diversity in practice and purposes of action research, and reflecting the specific local character of many action research projects. Participative action research can be long-term emergent inquiry, in which the form of inquiry itself undergoes change.

## **African action research**

Action research has many beginnings (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a). One appears to have been in Southern Africa. Of 19 English language reports from African countries, 11 were from South Africa, Tanzania or Zimbabwe.

After independence, the government of Tanzania adopted a political program to promote people's participation in their own development (Nyerere, 1968). Participatory action research was developed in cooperation with university departments in Dar Es Salaam, but participatory approaches were not promoted in universities or by funding agencies. (Swantz, Ndedya, & Masaiganah, 2001). By the 1990s top-down technical approaches has been found not to work, participatory approaches including participatory rural appraisal (Appleton, 1992) participatory problem solving (Schmid, Kanenda, Ahluwalia, & Kouletio, 2001) and participatory action research (Swantz et al., 2001) were promoted. In 1999 the Tanzanian Health Research Forum, which included universities, prioritised action oriented health research (Kitua, Marshalla, & Shija, 2000).

Research, like all human activity, takes place in political context. What are considered suitable as topics and approaches for research is influenced by domestic and international political factors. In South Africa under the apartheid regime, participatory and liberating approaches to research were not funded by government agencies. Some academics worked for social justice and freedom, but their efforts were not published. Participatory action research was not taught or practiced in University departments, and South African researchers were relatively isolated from international trends towards participatory development. From 1994, after the fall of the apartheid regime, South African academics faced a huge task of making up a shortfall in education, and finding approaches to research and development appropriate to the new political context. Many came to participatory action research for the first time, made links to research models they knew (Harmse, Pothas, & de Wet, 2002) and adapted participatory action research to suit the cultural and economic context of South Africa (Coughlan & Collins, 2001). That the first International Congress of Participatory Action Research to be held in Africa is in South Africa is evidence of the strength of the action research movement in Southern Africa, and the international recognition this is now receiving.

Much of the action research in Central and Northern Africa has been conducted by health professionals in African languages or French, and is under-represented in English language scientific journals. Participatory approaches began to be introduced into Francophone West Africa in the mid-1980s through participatory forestry projects. In 1984 several West African governments formally adopted participatory approach to village land management (Gestion des Terroirs). Burkina Faso was one of few countries to institutionalise this practice through a National Village Land Management Programme employing the Méthode Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative, or MARP, the Francophone equivalent of Participatory Rural Appraisal (Gueye, 1999). Unlike in other regions, where universities have played an important role in the development of participatory methods, in the Sahel they have been pioneered mainly by NGOs and natural resource management projects.

Francophone Universities in Africa appear to follow intellectual traditions and academic

cultures that emphasise research method rather than focusing on interactions among participants (Hussein, 1996). Leadership in participatory development has been provided by other institutions, such as l'Institut Panafricain de Développement (IPD) based in Ouagadougou and Douala, which are closer to practical issues in the field. Following this tradition, since 1991 the Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) in Burkina Faso has provided education for Action Research in health, mainly in Francophone Africa (see CIFRA, 1999). Through education, CIFRA assists practising health professionals to identify the needs of their communities and use action research in reproductive health, family planning, HIV/AIDS and other programs. CIFRA has contributed to the development of many health services from within.

## **International approaches to action research**

There have been a few attempts to develop explicitly international approaches in action research. Action research has been used to develop global education initiatives eg. (Bennett, 1995) and the World Bank Institute recommends action research in several programs (Langseth & Simpkins, 2000). Several international development agencies, including Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) the German technical cooperation agency, support developmental action research programs.

Since 1991 the Burkina Faso Ministry of Health has pioneered international education in Action Research with technical and financial assistance from GTZ. The Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) offers an international action learning program for health professionals each year, with other shorter specialist courses. The centre aims to contribute to the development of health and family planning services from within. It assists health workers to identify the needs of communities and use action research for resolving community health problems.

This French language course is organised once a year for about 20 participants. It comprises three phases. The first phase is a six-week basic course in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, during which participants learn about action research and plan a project. In the second phase, projects are implemented over ten weeks, with supervision. The final phase is two weeks of workshops and seminars during which participants complete their analyses and present their research in public.

The curriculum manual for this French language course was written in 1991 course and extensively revised in 1994. In 2001, international collaboration was widened to enable the course to be offered to English speaking health workers. Development of the current curriculum has involved input from Burkina Faso, Australia, Benin, Cameroon, France, Germany, Guinea, Mali and other countries. The CIFRA approach to curriculum development and education in action research has been explicitly international.

During the first English language course held at Bamenda, Cameroon in 2001, course facilitators from Burkina Faso, Australia, Cameroon and Germany met after classes each afternoon in a reflective workshop. Differences in approach to action research in health emerged during these workshops. Dialogue to articulate and resolve the differences led to a new model labelled 'the Bamenda model of action research'.

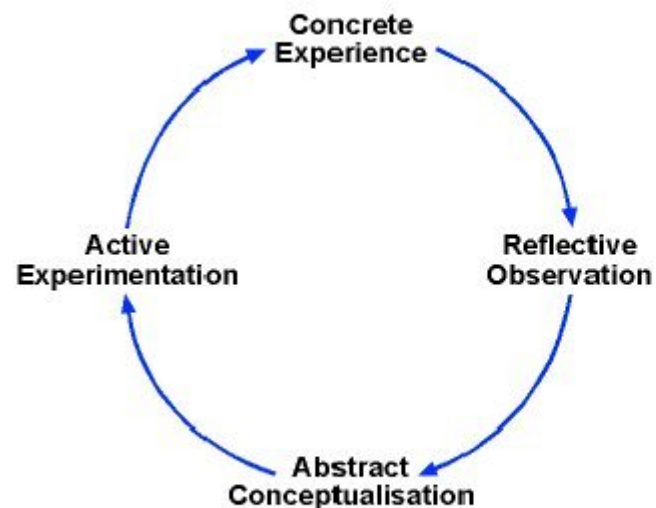
## **The Bamenda Model of Action Research**

Models are simplified representations of systems, which represent characteristics considered important by the modeller. They are useful to simplify discussion of complex patterns and relationships between concepts or parts of a system. Models are used to facilitate teaching and learning, to provide mental models for practice, or are used as theoretical models to

make sense of, or explain, what is observed to happen. Models are never true, but may be useful for some purposes.

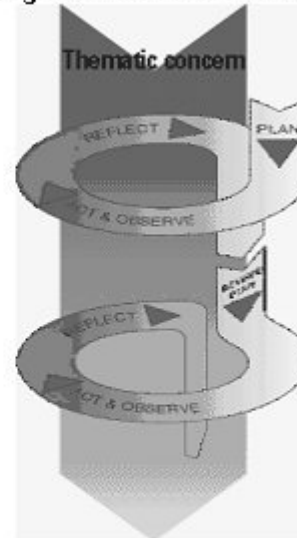
Making models is a popular pastime in action inquiry. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt identified 30 models of action learning and action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 1995). Possibly the simplest is Bob Dick's model of action and reflection (Dick, 2001). Perhaps the most widely known is the Kolb experiential learning cycle Figure 1 (Kolb, 1984) which has a clear relationship with Kemmis and McTaggart 's action research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect' Figure 2 (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

**Figure 1: The Kolb experiential learning cycle**



Source: (after Kolb, 1984)

**Figure 2: Action research spiral**



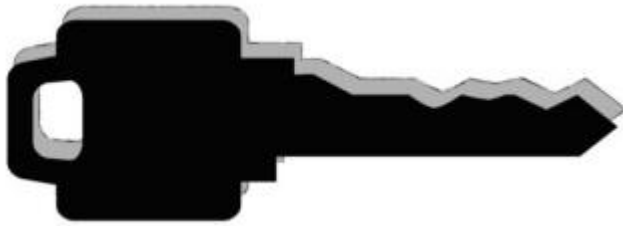
Source: (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

As noted above, there are many approaches to action research, depending on the purposes, cultural traditions, professional training and local context and other factors. African action research in health operates in poverty situations where resources have been declining in real terms while the AIDS pandemic and other factors increase need. The lack of resources for research and the urgent need for locally relevant knowledge creates demand for innovative, flexible and strategic approaches that quickly produce practical knowledge that can be directly applied in practice. In this context, a common need is to evaluate projects funded through international agencies, and to generate new approaches to interventions, including action to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS among very vulnerable populations.

The approach to learning in workshops facilitated through CIFRA is distinctively African. One of the course participants, who held the status of a traditional Chief, was informally adopted by facilitators and participants as the Chief of the gathering at Bamenda. He presided in certain formalities and rituals. Another participant was a minister of religion, who opened each day with prayer. Participants were actively involved through a facilitation style that ensured that each participant understood before proceeding.

In the workshop, a large wooden key was used as a metaphor to introduce Bob Dick's model of action research (Dick, 2001). The key to action research is the realisation that action research has two sides, action and research, in a single project.

Figure 3: The key to action research



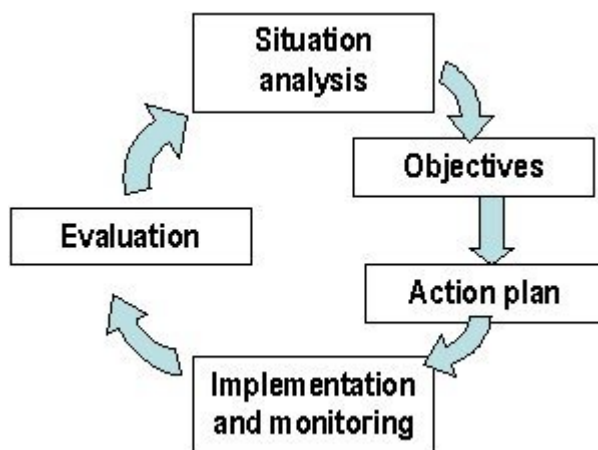
The key (Figure 3) has two sides. The front of the key is rough, and patterned, representing action to improve health. The back of the key, the part that is often unseen, is smooth, and represented research. As the key was held up, each participant could see one side only. To see both sides participants had to change their position (by moving to another part of the room). This is a metaphor of our need to be flexible in our attitude and perspective if we wish to engage in effective action research.

Action without reflection is one-sided. Without reflection, we do not learn from our experience as researchers or health professionals. Reflection without action does not produce change.

Before the Workshop, the facilitators visited the home of a local traditional chief, where we received a carved wooden staff, the symbol of royal power. The staff was used as a symbol of the power of action research. Just as the power of traditional Chiefs has survived colonial rule, economic exploitation and domination by external powers, but has been changed and transformed in the process; so action research can achieve useful results under adverse conditions, and with little funding, but only if it is flexible and adaptable. The wise Chief knows that his strength does not reside in a symbolic staff, but in his relationship with the people of the Chiefdom. The action researcher similarly realises that the strength of action research is not in a specific method or technique, but in the quality of participation by those who may be affected by the research and who have interests in it.

The Bamenda model assumes that action research takes place within the context of a continuing project, operating through repeated cycles. Detailed situation analysis always precedes action research plans. Dr Ndonko introduced discussion commenting that annual farming cycles known throughout Africa require planning built around annual cycles, in which no year is the same as any other. Accurate local knowledge and observation is needed. The farmer plans within constraints of available resources, environmental factors and knowing there are some things she cannot control (such as rain). The situation analysis was framed in the context of project management model adopted in many GTZ funded projects, presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Project Management Cycle



Source: (after CIFRA, 2001)

A project can start anywhere in the cycle, because the project must start where the participants and stakeholders are at. They may start at any phase of the cycle, or from some point not shown in Figure 4. Wherever the project starts, action researchers should move quickly into detailed situation analysis. It is necessary to know and document where you are at, and provide a reference point to measure change. Situation analysis is repeated in each cycle because the situation changes as an outcome of the action that is implemented and because of other forces in the system and its environment. The record of objectives and action plan are recorded can be used in evaluation. Implementation of the action plan is monitored, which involves recoding what happens as we go along. Evaluation includes outcome evaluation to see whether the objectives have been achieved, and other kinds of evaluations.

The project management cycle can be mapped on to other models. In Cameroon, a national health sector plan defines the policies and strategies in precise terms. Each Province plans how to give strategic support to health districts, which are the operational levels. District action plans are developed to guide projects, and these are monitored. However, as in many parts of Africa, there are not enough resources for effective monitoring. There is only one person in a Health District to do this, and that person has other responsibilities. There are not enough computers and networks to collect and process the data.

There is clear correspondence between the project management cycle in Figure 4 and the action research spiral in Figure 2, as shown in Table 1. One notable characteristic of the GTZ project management cycle is the emphasis placed on repeated and detailed situation analysis to monitor internal and external changes relevant to the project. It is clear that the GTZ project management cycle is one of the many models for action inquiry.

*Table 1: Action research and project management cycles*

<b>Action Research Spiral</b>	<b>Project Management Cycle</b>
Thematic concern	Situation analysis
Plan	Objectives
	Action plan
Act and observe	Implementation and monitoring
Reflect	Evaluation

GTZ and CIFRA consider project management following this cycle to be a form of action learning but not action research. The distinction is grounded in pragmatic knowledge of conditions on the ground. In all African countries, the needs for health services far outstrip the available resources. Staff routinely push delivery of services beyond what is reasonable to expect from the resources provided. Only minimal resources are available for project monitoring and data collection. Project staff may not spend time and resources on data collection if the clinical benefit is not immediately apparent. Data collection is frequently limited to the minimum required for project management and funding requirements. Data collection is often less systematic, thorough and rigorous than is ideal.

In health professions, the term 'research' is restricted to systematic and rigorous inquiry. Most projects, in Africa and elsewhere, are monitored, but not with the degree of rigour that is taken to characterise health research. Where resources are severely limited, it is even less realistic to expect that projects can be continuously monitored with research rigour.

At some point in the project management cycle (Figure 4) project managers or participants may see a need or opportunity to collect information in a more systematic and rigorous way. This may be because the project objectives are not being achieved, because the context or environment of the project has changed, because project evaluation discloses a need for greater information, because an opportunity to conduct research arises, or for some other reason. At this point, an action research project may be decided on. Action research, like project management, starts with situation analysis.

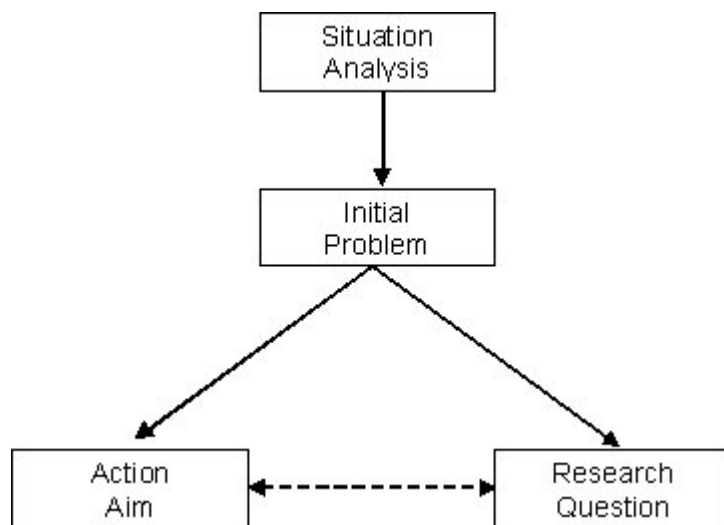
## Building the Bamenda Model

In reflective workshops over several days course facilitators discussed relationships between the GTZ project management cycle known to Doris Popp and Flavien Ndonko, the CIFRA framework for action research presented by Boukary Ouedroago, an Australian model of action research brought by Dr Hughes, and pragmatic aspects of health care in Cameroon known to Flavien Ndonko and John Ngum. This international discussion was mediated through a search for a diagram that could represent our emerging understanding.

African traditions in action research place a practical emphasis on development. Harmse and others note that similarities between action research and operations research (Harmse et al., 2002). From operations research came the useful technique of making clear and distinct statements of action aims and research questions. We noted a correspondence between Australian emphasis on 'action-and-research' as two sides of the key, and African differentiation between action aims and research questions. This led to a mapping of action (aims) and research (questions) arising from a situation (analysis). Dr Ouedroago pointed to similarities between the cycle of action research and the GTZ project management cycle, especially the value of repeated situation analysis for establishing both action aims and research questions.

In this model of practical action research, an analysis of the situation on the ground gives rise to a succinct statement of a problem to be worked on. This leads to aims to be achieved through action and questions to be answered through research. (see Figure 5). The action aim and research question are mutually dependant. The question arises from action, and research informs practice.

Figure 5: The Bamenda Model of Action Research (A)

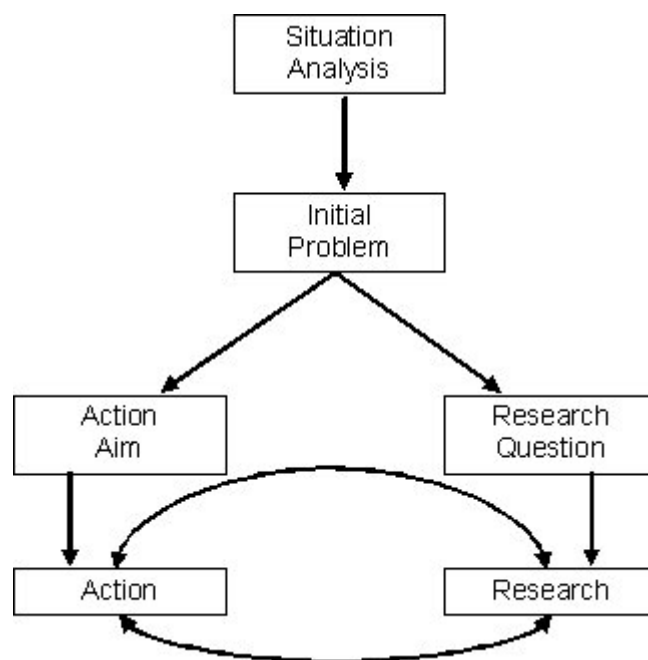


The problem statement is the link between research and action. When actions required to solve problems are clearly known and understood by participants, there is no need for research. If we know what to do to solve a problem, then we set objectives and continue with project management.

Research is required only when there is something we do not know, when there is a gap in the knowledge we require for effective action. It is possible to design action research projects so that the method used to collect data and the method used to improve action are the same. That is, the action and the research are completely unified, into a single process. This is not the strategy in the Bamenda model, where action and research are two distinct but related processes.

Practical action research sets out to generate knowledge required for action, and to ensure the direct application of the results. Practical action research directly improves practices or procedures. Improvement in action is integral to the action research process. The key test of validity for action research is not whether research procedures conform to rules established by academics and professional researchers, but whether the knowledge works in practice. Until the knowledge gained in action research is tested in practice, we do not know whether the action research is valid or not. Practical action research projects are not fully completed until the research findings are applied in practice. This is illustrated in Figure 6. The action (which in this context means either professional practice organised into projects or projects to improve health services or organisation) flows from the action aim. In other words, our action aims lead us to organise projects to achieve those aims. Our research involves the things we do to find answers to our research questions, the processes and procedures (organised as a research project) that we use to increase knowledge.

Figure 6: The Bamenda Model (B)

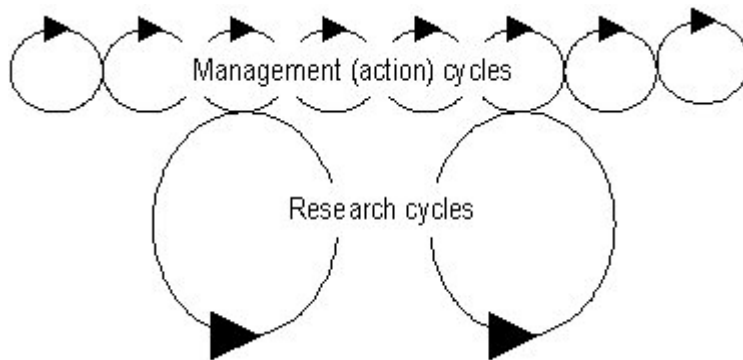


Action projects are managed through project management cycles such as the GTZ project management cycle presented in Figure 4 above.

The situation analysis is common to both the Bamenda model of action research and the GTZ project management cycle. The situation that is analysed at the end of a cycle is not the same situation that was analysed before objectives were set. Time has passed, external circumstances have changed and the action itself has produced change. The cycle would be better represented as a spiral rather than a circle.

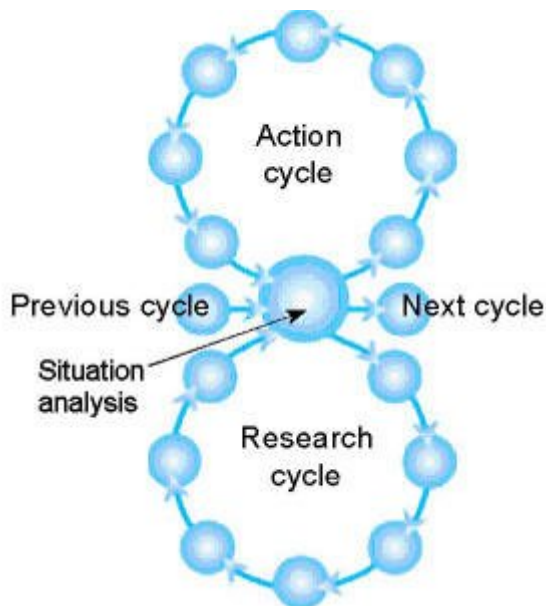
During the reflective workshop, the authors produced a diagram, illustrating that an ongoing health or development project runs through a project management spiral (repeated project management or action cycles). When the project runs into unanticipated difficulty, a need for new knowledge is recognised or when a major evaluation is required, a research cycle can be added in (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Action spiral with research cycles



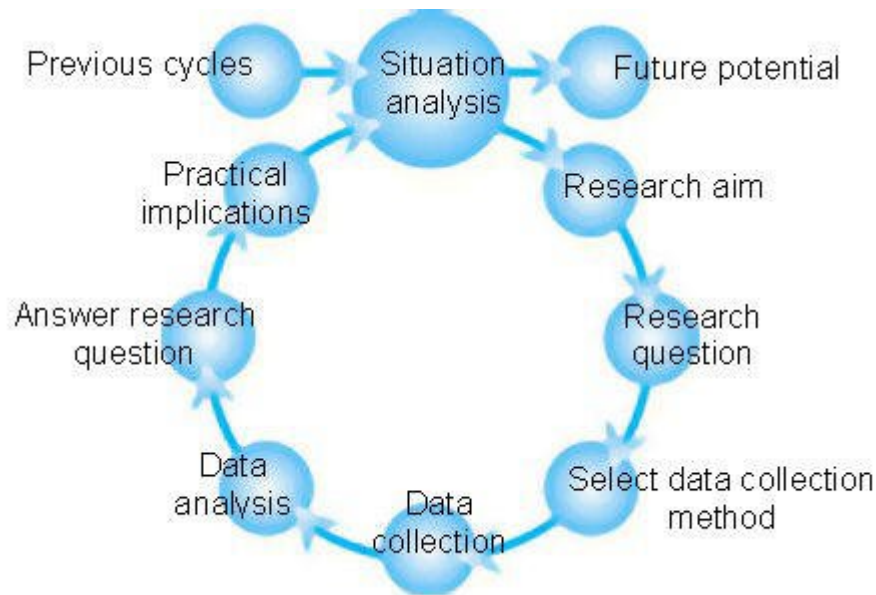
The important link between action and research is the process of reflection that, is part of the situation analysis in the Bamenda model. It is important to note that there is one situation analysis for both action and research cycles. The action cycle and the research cycle come together in situation analysis and reflection. In some forms of action research, including classroom action research and appreciative inquiry, action and research are united in all phases. That is, there is a single cycle of action-and-research, rather than an action cycle and a research cycle coming together at one point. As illustrated in Figure 8, situation analysis is the moment at which the two cycles of action and research are the same, and which mediates between previous action and future potential.

Figure 8: Situation analysis links action and research



In this paper, it is not possible to give a detailed account of the practical action research approach developed in Burkina Faso through many projects over more than a decade of learning, teaching and consulting. An outline of the cycle is given in Figure 9, taken from the manual ((CIFRA, 2001) used for CIFRA courses.

Figure 9: Practical action research cycle



## Discussion, implications and conclusion

Many models of action research describe a single process that combines action and research as one process in a single project. These models often require high resource levels, including large amounts of time from skilled participants. The Bamenda Model illustrates a way to combine action and research as separate processes in a single project. This model of practical action research is especially relevant to situations in which few resources are available to meet high levels of need. In this model, the important point of contact between action and research is the situation analysis, which leads to formulation, or re-examination of action aims and research questions. The clear distinction between action aims and research questions is borrowed from operations research.

The Bamenda Model is an elaboration and refinement of the previously existing model of practical action research taught by CIFRA for more than a decade. While the model is designed to interface with the GTZ project management cycle, it can easily be adapted to other project management systems. The Bamenda Model is an outcome of international cooperation between action researchers from three continents. The model was developed in Africa, for Africans and draws heavily on already existing African ways of doing action research.

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