

## CONTRIBUTING TO CIVIC INNOVATION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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### KEY WORDS

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*Reflexivity*  
*Participatory Action Research (PAR)*  
*Knowledge dialogues*  
*Transdisciplinarity*  
*Central America*

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### ABSTRACT

*‘Civic innovation is about focusing on what is positive, creative and imaginative in the face of a world that seems beset by crisis narratives’ (Biekart, Harcourt, Knorringa, 2016: 3). In exploring the term civic innovation, as it is used in Development Studies, ‘we are not looking for a new theory and practice that will lead to a grand transformation of neoliberal capitalism but rather at how to build a mosaic of responses by looking at what is happening on the ground where people are living the contradictions of development. It is argued that we need to question pre-determined ideas of what measures to take and go beyond universal policy solutions, in order to look with openness at the actions on the ground’ (Ibid.). In that sense, civic innovation can be perceived as the ‘political sister’ of social innovation as it directly assesses dominant power relations. The paper explores a different and trans-disciplinary approach to researching change: by descending from the academic ivory tower, respecting and deploying multiple knowledges for civic innovation, as well as approaching change with the ideas and tools of Participatory Action Research. Examples from knowledge dialogues with Central American social movements are used to explore this methodology further, including the downsides and the dilemmas. The paper concludes that carefully planned dialogues, reflexivity of facilitators, and awareness about potential power issues are probably key features of a knowledge generation process that may embody progressive social change..*

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## 1. Introducing civic innovation

Social science researchers often want their research to have relevance for society: after all, research outcomes should contribute to processes of social change (Wittmayer *et al.*, 2014). But the search for ‘societal relevance’ is seldom clearly defined, and generally framed in vague notions about ‘action research’. If we speak about the methodological challenges of social innovation research, we need to be clearer about what we want to achieve and for whom. This paper therefore will do two things. In the first place it will explore the nature of social innovation, and expand the notion by proposing the concept ‘civic innovation’. The second element addressed in the paper is to ask who will benefit from societally relevant research. Is it often not in the first place the researcher?

After all, the researcher will be able to claim the benefits of a publication as his/her name is attached to it. But whose interests are really served by socially oriented academic research? In order to address these questions, we will share some concrete experiences linked to participatory action research (with an example from Central America), and draw lessons that may be useful for researchers focusing on social (and civic) innovation and who may encounter a range of methodological challenges when dealing with participatory knowledge generation and transformative change.

Let me start by introducing the ideas on and the experiences with civic innovation. In fact, there are broadly speaking two approaches to civic innovation: the first is rooted in Urban Studies, whereas the second is more related to Development Studies. The urban-focused approach to civic innovation is practice-oriented and looks at improving the quality of life and the performance of government and non-profit organizations, also called ‘civic renewal’ (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). It is generally related to municipalities and cities that try to activate their citizens to improve the wellbeing of their communities. The developmental approach to civic innovation is still rather recent, and focuses explicitly on (global) citizens as change actors. Though the aim of this ‘newer’ civic innovation research is not really new: “to contribute to progressive and creative thinking about how societies change. This knowledge can offer possibilities to understand better (and imagine more confidently) alternatives to oppressive doom and gloom scenarios” (Biekart, Harcourt and Knorringa, 2016: 4). Through “acknowledging the fears, doubts and uncertainties, civic innovation aims to build connections and openings for social transformation”. In doing so, “one needs to confront the many frictions that are coming to the fore, often in depressing and ugly ways” (Ibid.). The depth of inequalities is not disputed, nor are the dysfunctions in our societies or the destructive pressures on our environments and the level of social despair about the future. The sense of hope is “that there are many people, in various institutions, cultures and societies who are eager to address these issues. The diversity of how to approach multiple levels of dysfunction is at the same time part of the messiness as well as part of the possibility for change” (Ibid.).

If we move away from a search for “one overarching approach or solution, which is common in Development Studies – such as examining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and instead look at how to bridge and forge connections among the different approaches, one can learn from a wealth of innovative ideas and practices” (Ibid). The practice of civic innovation research focuses on interdisciplinarity, orienting research beyond the confines of single disciplines. It challenges “Western universalism and social science approaches that rely too much on the principles of logical positivism. Civic innovation research looks at the real-life intersections between these and other paradigms as sources of friction that energise civic innovation in domains of action with institutional effects<sup>1</sup>. Studies of civic innovation seek to weave together non-hegemonic narratives about how people on the ground are overcoming profound obstacles in their direct challenge to social, political, economic and cultural inequalities. Through exploring these narratives obstacles are analyzed as well as break-through possibilities for social change” (Ibid).

The use of the term ‘civic innovation’ acknowledges that social transformation happens everywhere in society, at the global level as well as in communities, in governments, in markets, in families, as well as for individuals. Civic innovation is seen as a “generic term that is crosscutting but also inspiring” (Biekart, Harcourt and Knorringa, 2016: 5). The ‘civic’ element was developed from the civic-driven change research (Fowler and Biekart, 2008; 2013). Civic-driven implies a key role for citizens as well as for civic agency, something which is present throughout society. “This ‘24/7 citizen’ in peace time broke fast as a family member (or tax payer) in the morning, went to work in the household, or as an employee, or entrepreneur in the streets, or to the farms, or to study

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<sup>1</sup> See the statement of the Civic Innovation Research Initiative on the ISS website: [http://www.iss.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/iss/Research\\_and\\_projects/CIRI/Documents/CIRI\\_Public\\_Briefing\\_Note\\_Final.pdf](http://www.iss.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/iss/Research_and_projects/CIRI/Documents/CIRI_Public_Briefing_Note_Final.pdf)

or legislate and there grew food to sell, cared for the family and community, sold produce as a trader or bought as a consumer, contributed to governance activities and in the evening and holidays participated in family and community activity. This same 24/7 citizen has the potential of being a change agent in all these realms, thereby emphasising that ‘civic agency’ is not by definition linked to civil society, markets, or governments” (Biekart, Harcourt, Knorringa, 2016: 5). It has at least the potential to be crosscutting as well as bridging and connecting. An important underlying assumption is that civic innovation is both the civic-driven change process itself, as well as the eventual outcome of this process (Biekart and Fowler, 2012).

What has been proposed as a central element in civic-driven change is the notion of ‘civic energy’, which is a driver for collective and cooperative action, and thus also the driver of civic innovation (Ibid. 185). The idea of civic energy can be located within an emerging theoretical field of enquiry associated with values of ‘civility’ and its practical application to contemporary problems (Harward, 2013). A general approach has been to situate the values and behaviours that express civility as an attribute of civil society or the Third Sector and a cornerstone in providing public services as a common good (Dekker and Evers, 2009). However, a critical analysis invites reservations to the notion that civility ‘belongs’ to civil society rather than being distributed across all institutions as a necessary condition for the effective functioning of any social unit. Further, an association of civility with citizenship as an individual and collective identity 24/7 reinforces the argument that such values-based behaviour is present in all walks of life irrespective of a person’s (un)employment and source of income (Fowler, 2013a). Moreover, no segment of society is immune from behaviours that are ‘uncivic’, civil society included.

The ‘innovation’ concept has “an intuitive meaning - as a term used in social and technology sciences to refer to new approaches, tools, as well as policies that are creative” (Biekart, Harcourt and Knorringa, 2016: 5). Innovation is taken in a positive sense, “aware that innovation can be negative in both quality and meaning” (Ibid.). So the term innovation is used to refer to “creative forms of cultural political and economic resistance and pathways to social change. This is not to be confused however with ‘social innovation’, a term that often has been used as a flag for social entrepreneurs to explore new ways of contributing to more responsible businesses. Social innovation does not take directly on board the political dimension of change and rarely gives priority to gender/sexuality and embodiment” (Ibid.). Notwithstanding this limitation, social innovation is subject to a vivid academic debate, not in the last place in the contributions to this special issue (see also Mouleart, MacCallum, Hillier, 2013). However, Fowler (2013b: 29) warns that the expectations of the concept social innovation should not be overstated:

“At present, social innovation is conceptually attractive, empirically messy and politically underdimensioned if not wilfully naïve. The organisational features of social innovators that are not businesses are too diverse to pin down but should not be conceived in the resource ‘intermediation’ format common to NGOs involved in foreign aid. But what current social innovators appear to have in common with such NGOs is a political-economy which relies on grants. This condition may bring limitations on the scope of innovations that can be explored.”

## 2. Appropriate research approaches

This paper is, however, not focusing on a conceptual discussion of social innovation; it wants to argue that there is a preference for the use of the concept ‘civic innovation’, as it allows me to emphasise the implicit and essential political dimensions of social transformation processes. “The research on civic innovation aims to contribute to ‘liberating knowledge’, that is, knowledge that embodies progressive social change. This may refer to research undertaken ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ groups that struggle for recognition, equality and empowerment. It may also relate to knowledge

generated by activists in an academic setting, produced according to academic standards, but applied within processes of transformative social change” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 233).

In these settings, the concept ‘participation’ often pops up, suggesting active involvement of those actors who are driving change processes. But especially in Development Studies, based on many examples from local practice, participation discourses have met with caution (Hickey and Mohan, 2005; Chambers, 2008), or have been openly criticised as undermining for social change (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). There also is a tradition to focus on action, in order to make knowledge generation more relevant to progressive social change. The concept of ‘action research’ became popular after Kurt Lewin (1946) published his work with factories and neighbourhood communities in the United States, emphasising the importance of self-reflection and discussion of researchers with these community groups. His students promoted action research as “the means of systematic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation” (Adelman, 1993: 7). Here we already see the seeds of combining participation and action in research, which in the 1960s and thereafter evolved into the paradigm of Participatory Action Research.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is generally defined as a collaborative process of research, education, and action which is oriented towards social transformation (McTaggart, 1989; Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Brock and Petit, 2007; Kindon *et al.*, 2007). PAR is a research approach, rather than a research methodology, and was initially developed in Latin America, Africa, Asia and later also applied in countries such as Australia and Canada with the objective to actively involve change actors into the knowledge production process with the aim to facilitate their empowerment (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). PAR is based on the recognition of a plurality of knowledges, which means that those who have been most systematically exposed to repression will likely have specific experience and knowledge about the history as well as the consequences of unjust social arrangements. This knowledge will be by definition quite different compared to the expertise of an academically trained researcher without this background. As Kindon (2007: 9) argues: “PAR therefore represents a counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production.”

Efforts to making knowledge generation “more relevant to progressive social change are of course not new in social science research” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2018: 233). Flyvbjerg (2001) envisages an alternative social science dedicated to ‘enhancing socially relevant forms of knowledge’. His work has triggered research into ways to address and act upon social problems in a particular context (Flyvbjerg *et al.* 2012: 1). “Feminist theories of knowledge have pointed out that values and partiality are part and parcel of all knowledge generation, that departing from the perspectives of the marginalized helps to move towards greater social justice and that knowledge needs to be expressed in accessible terms to be useful for change” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 233-4). “The recognition that different types of knowledge exist and matter results in modesty regarding our ability to know: clearly, it is not the ‘academic experts’ who know best” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 239). This is probably the key methodological challenge for civic innovation researchers: how to capture this plurality of knowledges without disempowering the co-researchers? How to apply a PAR approach, whilst avoiding the obvious driver’s seat to make sure the end product is (predominantly) valid for the academic researcher?

The acknowledgement that “multiple knowledges need to be mobilized in order to assess civic innovation processes has to be translated into an involvement of all co-researchers in choices about relevant topics and adequate ways to generate, analyse and disseminate knowledge (Sinha and Back 2014: 478). Besides unlearning privilege in order to make space for marginalised voices, careful listening is essential in a process of Participatory Action Research. This enables dialogue between different people and groups committed to progressive social change. Sinha and Back (2014: 482) also argue that fostering sociable dialogues in research - besides being more respectful towards research participants - also supports an orientation towards collective analysis of social problems and community action” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 240). Visualization is one way to trigger these dialogues conversations, which can “overcome language ambiguities as well as rational and linear

arguments” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 242). Visual techniques such as drawing, photography and video are therefore central to Participatory Action Research, as they may trigger conversations about rather complex issues and processes. “Drawings, as well as video and theatre can be equally important and powerful media to generate stories and knowledge ‘from below’ as text” (Ibid.). This more diverse set of communication tools helps us “to broaden the circle of people we communicate with, and to include those who can relate to an image of resistance to mining rather than to a theory of social movements” (Ibid.).

### 3. Knowledge dialogues with Central American social movements

An insightful illustration of this practice of Participatory Action Research has been the joint collaboration between the Dutch development NGO Hivos and the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the so-called ‘Knowledge Programme on Civil Society Building’.<sup>2</sup> This programme (between 2007 and 2010) was a unique experiment in combining innovative research on civil society formation with active knowledge dialogues between social movement activists and researchers. The programme was financed with Dutch (governmental) development funding channelled via Hivos and involved three Hivos partners (all local knowledge generation NGOs), three social movements, and the ISS. The programme aimed to contribute to improving policies that were geared towards strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations. The participatory approaches employed were new for everyone involved, though all agreed that this was not going to be a traditional academic exercise from which the movements would gain very little. Therefore, “the start-up of this research process was carefully done together with the movements themselves”, which were all so-called ‘new’, if not ‘innovative’, social movements as we will see below (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 3).

The knowledge dialogues focused on three movements: the movement against the free trade agreement in Costa Rica, the women’s movement in Nicaragua, and the indigenous movement in Guatemala. “All three were considered to be highly relevant and innovative movements with broad national constituencies” (Ibid.). A Central American consultative workshop in 2007 identified the leading issues for the research programme, and discussed strategies and approaches in the various national contexts of Central America. “Social movement activists as well as researchers were invited to discuss the strategic relevance of this research for their own movements and struggles. This first encounter was crucial for three reasons: (i) priorities were jointly set for the dialogue process, (ii) essential viewpoints on the ways in which to engage in knowledge generation between practitioners and academics were debated, (iii) a network of researchers and activists was created that would play a key role throughout the following three years” (Valverde, 2008: 4-5; Ibid.).

One of the key aims of the Hivos knowledge programme was to enhance “the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions through knowledge development” (Stremmelaar, 2009: 78). The preparatory phase included an exchange between activists from Central America and supporters of the Zapatista *indigena* movement for autonomy in Chiapas, which had a long tradition and a vast experience with processes and methodologies of collaborative research between academics and activists. This activity allowed the research team to engage with the practice of committed research as a critical tendency within the politics of knowledge production and to reflect about the subjective and political nature of academic research (Leyva and Speed, 2008; Icaza and Vázquez, 2013). “The workshop generated a critical self-reflection on knowledge production, dissemination and integration on questions such as ‘for whom and with which purpose is knowledge produced in order to challenge mainstream academic research?’, and ‘how are dominant approaches

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of the planning and implementation of the Knowledge Programme is largely based on internal (Spanish) documents and reports, including Biekart and Icaza (2011), Hivos-ISS (2007), Valverde (2008).

to knowledge cooperation dealing with this?” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 4).

The notion of ‘knowledge dialogues’ became a guiding principle in the research programme. They were expected “to have the potential to counter relationships of inequality based on geographical location, gender, and ethnicity. The purpose was to ‘uncover knowledges’ that otherwise would have been marginalized by traditional forms of research or by quick consultancy-style mapping exercises. The knowledge dialogues as methodological tools were conceived as activities of listening (rather than recording) without pre-determined parameters, and in accordance with the participants’ knowledge practices. The various research teams had relatively little experience with participatory research in the region, but everyone involved was conscious about what they did not want: an outsiders’ view on their social struggles, published in an academic form that would not be accessible or useful to the movements themselves. The selection and composition of the research teams (one co-ordinating researcher, plus at least one leader from the movement, supported by a consultative council from each movement) was a crucial step in the knowledge dialogue, as it would guarantee the movement’s ownership of the process. Another important decision was to bring the national research teams together at regular intervals, in order to exchange experiences but also to engage in cross-national discussions. Moreover, it was decided that all findings would be discussed first with the movements before they were published” (Ibid.).

Inspired by the Chiapas workshop, “each country team followed more or less the same steps in the knowledge dialogue process. A national seminar was organized with representatives from all organizations and groups involved in the movement to define objectives and methods for the dialogue, followed by seminars in the sub regions in order to collect region-specific data through interviews, document research and focus group discussions. Draft reports were discussed by the national consultative groups, and by the international support team, and then discussed with movement representatives. The Guatemala case was slightly different, as the team decided to focus on one of the local struggles, rather than at the (highly complex) national movement dynamics. In Guatemala it also had been a challenge to compose a solid research team, as identified researchers and organizations several times pulled out of the process” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 4-5).

The Central American knowledge dialogue focused on three questions. “The first one was: ‘what have been the dynamics of Central American social movements’? We wanted to examine how the various movements unfolded from local membership groups to larger networks of multiple groups and organisations, towards broader issue movements. The important element was to understand and explain how this social clustering worked, and how advocacy or support NGOs operated in this process. But also to examine how leaders responded to members or ‘followers’, and which type of communication channels were preferred. By selecting and comparing several social movement experiences, we were hoping to get a better understanding of this dynamic process of social movement formation in different contexts” (Ibid.).

Secondly, we asked: ‘what had been the role of external actors, in particular of (donor) NGOs?’ (Biekart and Bebbington, 2007). “The central concern in the Central American process was to assess how (and whether) social movement dynamics can be supported without distorting and undermining them. The assumption was that social movements have a particular optimum beyond which support is becoming counterproductive. A challenge was therefore to find out how to locate this optimal point, or at least how to make sure movements are supported in the phase of growth rather than in the degeneration phase. Another challenge was to examine which group, or level, or network within this movement dynamics was most effectively supported in order to positively contribute to the strengthening of a given social movement. Internal (national) and external (international) support as well as material and non-material forms of support were to be examined” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 5).

The third central research question looked at relevance: ‘is support to social movement activities contributing to sustainable change in unequal power balances, in particular favouring the most marginalized?’ (Ibid.) “The underlying question was whether civil society building strategies

aimed at strengthening social movements in the end were really benefiting the poor and the (socially and politically) excluded. We explored whether social movements were at all part of civil society, or rather part of broader processes of socio-political and socio-economic change. These issues pointed at an exploration of a wider agenda in which support to social movements, rather than being an end in itself, would be a means to achieving broader goals of social transformation in the long run” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 5-6).

A number of key lessons can be drawn from the knowledge dialogues between academics and activists, which also echoes some of the theoretical discussions earlier referred to in the paper. A first lesson was that “a knowledge dialogue (*diálogo de saberes*) is a complex undertaking that requires careful preparation and active involvement of activists as well as (local) researchers” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 26). It appeared that the researchers highlighted different (and more critical) lessons than the movement leaders. In fact, these leaders indicated they had generated a set of valuable insights from their own reflection process; this probably was the most important outcome of the entire knowledge programme. It confirmed the existence of a plurality of knowledges, but also that the movements had benefitted more from the process than the researchers. It actually reminded the academic researchers to be more ‘modest’ about their particular expertise. The knowledge dialogue as a participatory research tool is closely linked to more recent attempts towards reflection within social movements (Leyva Solando and Speed, 2008; Escobar, 2008). “The present programme would probably have been unthinkable three decades ago, when movements were more closed and tightly linked to either a party discipline, or operating in a clandestine setting underground. The structural changes stimulated by the three social movements were thus located in a ‘new politics of knowledge generation’ ” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 26).

Another lesson was that an internal reflection process of social movements “requires an open leadership that agrees to allow room for opposing views” (Ibid.). This links back to the notion of ‘civic energy’ as a driver of collective and cooperative action in processes of civic-driven change (Biekart and Fowler, 2012: 185). But it also emphasised the essential PAR imperative of ‘careful’ or ‘deep’ listening to voices and opinions that are less prominent or dominant. “The three movements demonstrated the existence of multiple foci of leadership: this heterogeneity seemed to be a direct result of a larger autonomy from orthodox political parties, giving room for more internal diversity of strategies, and therefore more diversity in the leadership structure. In a context of repression (as we saw in Central America) this internal diversity can at times undermine the dialogue process. After all, a movement will in principle always prioritise efforts towards strengthening itself. However, the central struggle was not about positions, but about ideas. Therefore it is really important to make a distinction between ‘organizations’ (in which leaders have institutional interests to defend vis-à-vis the members that elected them) and ‘movements’, which have neither self-appointed leadership nor strict institutional restrictions” (Biekart and Icaza, 2011: 26-27).

A final lesson was that “Participatory Action Research should not be idealised as the new mantra for knowledge production, always leading to transformative change and/or civic innovation. To the contrary, as we have seen in the conceptual discussion of PAR, the ‘participation’ element often is not used in every stage of the research” (Ibid. 27). This is understandable since “generating knowledges through dialogue and participation, involving a multitude of stakeholders, can be a slow and messy process, often generating more frustration than knowledge” (Ibid.). For example, the movements were frustrated about the short time planning of the dialogues, whereas academics were disappointed that eventually all output was non-academic. “High expectations about the outcomes are seldom realised, since success depends on a range of hardly controllable variables. It is much easier to hire a consultant for three months to ‘extract’ all the information required and put this in a well-written and neatly edited report. This is probably cheaper, more efficient, and leads to more visible results. However, based on the experiences of the knowledge dialogues, traditional consultancy approaches are probably less likely to generate knowledge from within the movements

which will also benefit the movements themselves (rather than the consultant only)” (Ibid.; Bergh and Biekart, 2016).

#### 4. Dealing with dilemmas

There are of course “risks and dilemmas in any research that seriously engages with the epistemological and methodological principles outlined above” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 243). The commitment to Participatory Action Research (PAR) “as an expression of respect for a plurality of knowledges is easy to state in theory” (Ibid. 245). However, as we have seen above, working with a PAR approach ‘in practice’ often can be problematic. “The views of different actors frequently do not complement each other to one coherent whole, but are contradictory and contest each other’s basis to know. The inextricable connection between knowledge and values implies that each potential participant in a knowledge dialogue brings her/his own interests to the deliberative table. How to decide whose agenda is most in line with the value of progressive social change? And: who may rightfully claim the authority to take this decision?” (Ibid.).

We know we have to be very careful about language and discourse, explaining concepts well and with patience, and making sure everyone is not only listening carefully but also hearing the same things. We recognised this in our discussion about the difference between ‘social’ and ‘civic’ innovation, a difference that is not obvious (or explicitly made) in every language. It implies we have to explain carefully what we mean and if this generates confusion, then to see this as an opportunity to learn and reflect even more extensive about how we can improve our dialogue between participants from very different backgrounds. As researchers interested in understanding the process of civic innovation (or transformative change, if that concept is better capturing the process) we are convinced that the key methodological challenge is to generate knowledges (plural) that genuinely contribute to social change.

PAR is a really useful and exciting instrument in this endeavour, as long as we are clear about what we want, what we mean, when we want it, with whom and for whom. A major limitation of PAR is that we skip these questions and fall into the trap of what Chambers (2008:182) has called ‘facipulation’ (manipulation via facilitation). “In civic innovation research it is common that the researcher is operating in conflictual settings, so being aware of potential power battles is very important. More importantly, ‘[r]esearch is as much a process of power as any other sphere of life’ (Clegg and Pitsis 2012: 67). Therefore, knowledge production that is not sensitive to - internal or external - power relations runs the risk of undermining change processes or strengthening hierarchies. A ‘power check’ is therefore recommended when engaging with change agents in order to prevent conflicts between researchers and activists. Simmons (2012: 254) suggests that: ‘[w]e must resist the temptation where we believe that we have included all voices – we must continuously deconstruct how we continue to privilege or stage certain voices” (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 246).

“These dilemmas about power, empowerment, and legitimacy are not always easy to resolve. In our discussions we basically identified four ways to deal with this. The first was to be modest about our role and potential as activist researchers. We have to develop and maintain a sense of responsibility about our potential disruptive and steering role in initiating and managing research activities. A second and related condition is to maintain a self-reflective attitude at all times, even if this sounds obvious. It implies that we cannot always put our own research objectives central and that we often have to give in for the interest of the final outcome” (Ibid). Especially at the start of a Participatory Action Research process, when everyone still has to become part of the flow and get used to new practices and concepts, facilitators often tend to go too quick. Only thorough self-reflection can help to prevent this from happening. A third way to deal with these dilemmas is to make sure we are aware of our own prejudices about a particular movement, or about a particular change process. It implies for example that we are aware of the complexity of “frictions, factions and internal power relations” in a movement or



organization, so that we can be sure to take all voices into account (Biekart and Siegmann, 2016: 247).

A fourth possible perspective to keep in mind is “to make sure our research primarily serves the objective of the social transformation process, rather than academic careers or individual hobbies or priorities. This last element is not at all easy to comply with: we only know what a research outcome looks like after several years” (Ibid.). But others – particularly those directly affected and/or involved – are quite capable to tell us how useful our research has been for their process of social transformation. The point is that we as academic researchers often still have to learn how to listen to these voices.

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