

➔ WEST AFRICA: ACTION RESEARCH TEACHES PROBLEM SOLVING ON THE JOB

In a Nutshell

The daily reality of overwhelmed health and social services in many developing countries confronts staff in these fields with seemingly insoluble problems. While many contribute considerable knowledge and skills, they often lack the encouragement to act self-reliantly and effectively to address the issues that arise. Action research offers a way out of this dilemma, because it elicits existing knowledge and then devises appropriate responses to challenges, in tandem with all concerned.

Since 1991, the Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) in Burkina Faso has conducted action research training courses for health and social workers across West Africa. Participants are better able to analyse routine problems and resolve them with few resources. Many have acknowledged the effectiveness of this approach.

The Story

To strengthen the capacities of district health systems, donors often finance short-term courses to sharpen the skills of workers in first-line health services and support structures. Such training has become a kind of reward system and can be effective. Nevertheless, a gap often remains between its content and the realities on the ground: health teams must deal with problems that are often specific to the setting they are in, and little research is available on how to resolve them.

Often these problems seem overwhelming, causing even dedicated health workers to give up. In other cases, despite well-developed skills and considerable knowledge about the people they care for, staff struggle to use their understanding proactively. There is little emphasis on problem-solving techniques, or encouragement to improve care and working conditions.

This is where action research comes in, because it is about investigating one's own work environment, and then developing and implementing appropriate solutions for the problems identified. It teaches skills that can be applied across a host of different situations and can help bring about continuous system development. It focuses on teams of professionals rather than individuals; addresses the capacity needs of these teams in their environment; and helps actors, such as health professionals, to solve problems together with the people concerned, such as their clients.

CIFRA has promoted action research in Burkina Faso as part of a supra-regional project. Since 1991, it has conducted training courses to provide health and social workers – managerial staff, doctors, advisors, nurses and midwives – with skills to systematically analyse and resolve problems encountered in the workplace. Each

year an international training is held in Burkina Faso, involving a basic course, a practical study segment and an evaluation seminar:

- *The basic course* introduces the action research methodology. It teaches situation and problem analysis techniques, with participants delving into solutions appropriate to their working environment. Methods of action research such as interviews, observation and focus group discussions are learned in theory, then tested and put into practice in case studies.
- During the subsequent *practical study segment*, participants conduct an action research study independently in their workplace, dealing with a concrete problem they face on a daily basis. Together with colleagues, clients and decision makers, they analyse the case, devise solutions, and identify and take appropriate actions.
- Finally, in an *evaluation seminar*, participants present the results of their study. Together, they review their practical experiences and prepare themselves to implement their conclusions.

Since the start of action research training at CIFRA, numerous participants have graduated – such as an array of staff from Togo’s rural and urban health services as well as from NGOs. When GTZ assisted health project managers to explore the broader impact of this training, they found that former trainees in Togo had become very effective in their workplaces. A configuration was worked out with CIFRA that included the training of trainers during the international courses and follow-up regional courses in the country. Two senior staff members of the regional health management teams in Sokode (Central Region) and Lome (the capital city) participated in the 1999 and 2000 international courses.

Their practical study segments were carried out with members of the regional health management teams and narrowed in on the problems these teams had identified in their annual action plans. The results were then discussed during a follow-up planning exercise and presented to the research unit of the medical faculty of the University of Lome. The trainers also organized a course for 30 participants: two members of each of the district health teams (four in Central Region and five in Lome), the two regional health teams and some members of NGOs that were collaborating with these groups.

Results and Critical Factors

- So far, 11 supra-regional courses with over 450 participants have been organized in Burkina Faso, with participants from 14 countries in West and Central Africa, the Maghreb and Europe. Several regional courses have taken place in Burkina Faso, as well as in Benin, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Togo for over 250 participants. Since the middle of 2001, courses have also been offered in anglophone countries.
- According to the instructors, participation in the courses is above average. Students are highly motivated because the course offers them real

opportunities to influence their work. The action researchers are proud of the awards the 1997, 1998, 2000 and 2001 studies received at the Journées Scientifiques du Houet (Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso).

- A 1997 project progress review found that, after training, participants are more likely to conduct an objective analysis of problems and resolve them, often with few resources. Many are more motivated, develop their own initiatives and can perform their management functions even under difficult circumstances.
- An impact evaluation in 2001 found that three out of four participants from Burkina Faso and Togo managed to implement at least one of the actions identified during their training. Approximately half of all actions were effective. Two out of ten participants integrated the action research model into their daily work and had already used it at least a second time for problem solving.
- A critical element of the Togo experience was the lack of the transmission of acquired knowledge to other district health team members. This was counterbalanced by the fact that a critical mass of two members (out of five or six) of the district and regional health management teams were trained. As a result, the new knowledge was used in preparing the national health development plan. This took place in a bottom-up manner through the district and regional health development plans, with the trained team members performing well due to their enhanced decision-making capacity.
- All participants acknowledged that the course had influenced their way of dealing with their daily workload and problems. This was especially evident in Togo, where success factors seem to include the long-term stability of the staff as well as their high professional and ethical standards.

Further information

German Technical Assistance (GTZ). *Action Research – A Robust Hands-On Approach* (www.gtz.de/action-research/english/intro/intro.html).

List of projects carried out in the context of the Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) International Course on Action Research in Health (www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow//cifra/projects1.htm).

Overview of the Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) International Course on Action Research (www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow//cifra/french/french.htm).

Project summary: Centre International de Formation en Recherche Action (CIFRA) – Action Research Training Course (www.shared-global.org/projectsummary.asp?Kennummer=4689).

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