சிந்தனை *Sindhanai*

The Praxis of Participatory Action Research

Through the Lens of Sindhanai

சிந்தனை
(Sindhanai)

ABOUT சிந்தனை
(SINDHANAI)

In recent times, collectivisation has gained recognition as an important approach in development aid programmes. It is now seen as a strategy to ensure sustainability and to scale up social initiatives. There is growing acknowledgment that community-led efforts are central to creating systemic shifts and structural change.

With this, terms like participatory grantmaking, localisation, intersectionality, dignity, systemic shift, structural transformation, and social movement have been around for a long time and come from strong powerful roots. But today, they are often used in more sanitised, less political ways that dilute their original meaning. These are deeply political ideas, yet they often fall victim to depoliticisation in practice.

The measurement community has played a role in this depoliticisation. As more organisations and donors turn to collectives to drive social change, there is a risk that collectives are treated as a simple solution to complex problems, without understanding the power struggles and contradictions that exist within them. Often, measurement frameworks are designed separately from the collectivisation process, creating a parallel track instead of an integrated one.

There is a clear need to embed measurement within collectivisation itself. Sindhanai, a Tamil word meaning thinking and reflection, represents this idea. It is not only a journey of critical thinking within collectives but also a process of self-assessment to understand movement and change. Sindhanai draws and engages with principles of participatory action research, where learning and change happen together through collective reflection and action. As a contemplative pedagogy, சிந்தனை (Sindhanai) encourages openness and the inclusion of diverse voices through thoughtful reflection. It allows collectives to adjust their strategies and messages as needed to stay effective and responsive.

The Sindhanai initiative, launched in January 2023, recognises the need to create a collective of evaluators with lived experiences of marginalisation. Their perspectives can shape both evaluation practices and the broader norms that define the evaluation ecosystem. The initiative aims to mainstream tools, methods, and perspectives developed within collectives, especially in the Global South, to influence the politics of both evaluation and grantmaking.

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INTRODUCTION

The '*Praxis of Participatory Action Research: Through the Lens of Sindhanai*' was prepared for the 27th edition of the Praxis international Commune on Participatory Development held from October 9-14, 2025. This manual presents one way of organising Participatory Action Research **(PAR)** with its theory, practice, and politics, organised across three sections. This feeds into the Centres for Exchange project, which aims to realise principles of equity, inclusion, and care in health research. The project is supported by the Wellcome Trust, London, which has made a commitment that by 2031, all Wellcome-funded research will be inclusive in both design and practice.

The manual has three sections. The first section, chapter, *Principle of Participatory Action Research*, explains how different research traditions engage people, showing how PAR differs by placing communities as co-researchers rather than subjects. It introduces *Sindhanai*, critical reflection, as the political foundation of participatory inquiry. The second section, *Shifting Power through the Stages of the Research Cycle*, outlines the four stages of PAR: Framing the Inquiry, Action through Evidence, Making Meaning Together, and Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power, each representing a shift in knowledge and control. The next three chapters elaborate these stages in detail: how framing builds foundations through shared goals and theories of change; how action turns evidence into collective learning; and how meaning-making joins multiple perspectives to co-create analysis. The final section, *Watch-outs Across Stages of PAR*, distils ten key reminders for practice; emphasising reflection, leadership from within, positionality, and the ongoing nature of learning. Together, the report positions PAR as a living process of inquiry, reflection, and transformation rooted in collective reflection.

The manual was prepared by Pradeep Narayanan, with inputs from Tarini J. Shipurkar and Sarah Iqbal. The guide was inspired by various discussions with Jogendra Parihar, Anil Balmiki, Athena Joseph, Nafeesa Khan, Neha Narayanan, Sam Jacob, Sarulatha, Tom Thomas, Dheeraj, Anusha Chandrasekharan and Stanley Joseph. This book is based on a number of original concepts of a number of thinkers from the Global South.

I. PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Research can take many forms depending on how researchers relate to the people and situations they study. The degree of participation, control, and purpose differs across approaches, shaping how knowledge is created, produced, shared and used.

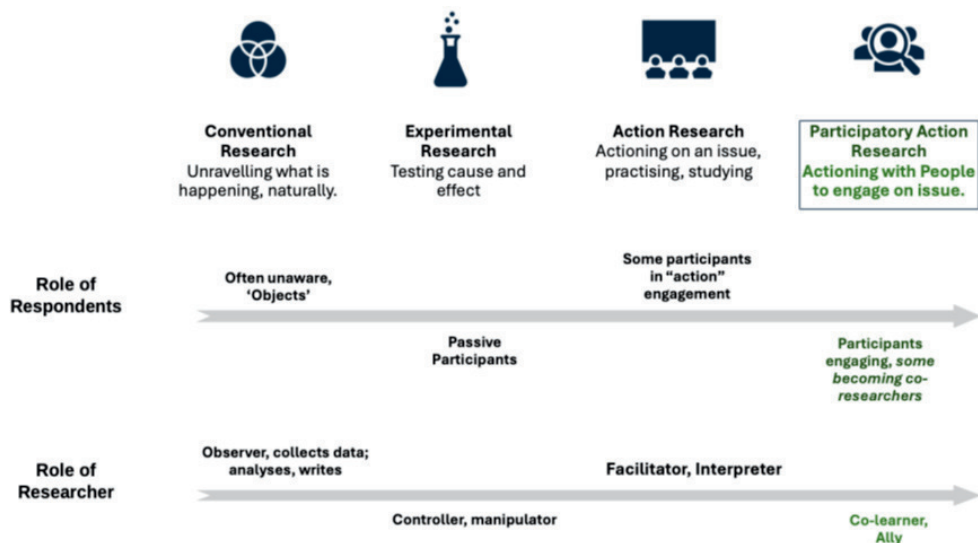## Respondent Participation in Various kinds of Research

In conventional research, the aim is to observe and describe what is happening naturally. Even respondents are often unaware that they are part of the research, being treated as objects of study. The researcher's role is that of an observer who collects data, analyses it, and writes findings, maintaining distance and neutrality. In Participatory Action Research (PAR), the boundaries between researcher and participant dissolve further. The process involves actioning with people to engage on shared issues. Respondents are no longer mere subjects but co-learners or even co-researchers who contribute to framing questions, gathering data, and interpreting findings. The researcher becomes a co-learner and ally, emphasising mutual learning, shared ownership of knowledge, and collective transformation. The shift from research on people to research with people; and eventually, research by people themselves, is the spirit of PAR.

> Conventionally, *research* is often seen as learning through "observing a situation, event, phenomenon, or scenario by being witness to it". It is about studying a situation or event happening naturally. Usually, researchers do not interfere with the situation they are studying because interfering can change how the situation naturally works. If researchers do interfere, they would be studying a changed situation, not the original one.

> In contrast, there is also action research, which involves people working to solve a problem in their own health setting like a clinic or hospital. For example, a healthcare team might try new ways to improve patient communication and check how it affects patient satisfaction, focusing on addressing a local issue in that specific context. The difference between experimental research and action research lies in scope and control: action research is context-specific, flexible, and focused on solving a local problem whereas experimental research is more controlled, aiming to draw generalisable conclusions about cause-and-effect in a broader context.

> However, there is a type of research called *experimental research*, in which researchers deliberately introduce a change or intervention to see its effect. An example is a drug trial where a new medicine is tested on participants to check if it works and is safe. Researchers compare results from people getting the new drug to those getting a standard treatment or a placebo. This helps determine if the new drug causes a specific outcome like improving symptoms. The trial is often done carefully with controls to get reliable results.

> While in action research, researchers often lead the process to solve a problem in a specific setting, there is also participatory action research, where there is a stronger emphasis on collaboration and empowerment of the participants themselves in all stages of the research—from identifying the problem to taking action based on findings. Participatory action research tends to be more inclusive of community members or stakeholders as co-researchers, aiming for collective empowerment and social change.

	Conventional Research	Experimental Research	Action Research	Participatory Action Research
	Unravelling what is happening, naturally.	Testing cause and effect	Actioning on an issue, practising, studying	Actioning with People to engage on issue.

| Role of Respondents | Often unaware, 'Objects' | | Some participants in "action" engagement | |
| | | Passive Participants | | Participants engaging, some becoming co-researchers |

| Role of Researcher | Observer, collects data; analyses, writes | | Facilitator, Interpreter | |
| | | Controller, manipulator | | Co-learner, Ally |

Participation is intrinsic to Research

A clinical trial that tests a vaccine must follow strict protocols that leave little room for community-led reshaping. A baseline survey that compares data across districts also serves its own function. These forms of research are not lesser—they are simply different. What makes participatory research distinctive is not that it claims superiority, but that it becomes indispensable whenever the knowledge sought lies with the people themselves—knowledge the researcher does not already possess.

When knowledge is embodied in lived experience, rooted in community memory, or shaped through daily practice, participation is not an added feature or a gesture of inclusion. It becomes the very foundation of the research process. If knowledge resides with people, and if the aim is to bring that knowledge into research with dignity, respect, and care, then participation is not optional—it is intrinsic.

In such contexts, participation means more than consultation or data collection; it means active involvement at every stage, from defining the questions to generating, analysing, and using the findings.

Respondents become co-researchers whose interpretations are validated, debated, and refined through collective engagement. This makes the knowledge produced both authentic and grounded. Crucially, the research questions themselves evolve through dialogue, reflecting participants' lived realities and their ownership of the inquiry.

Participation, then, becomes meaningful only when there is genuine co-ownership of purpose—not just the physical presence of people. Without shared ownership, participation risks becoming a procedural checkbox, leaving the power relations of conventional research intact. True participation transforms the research process into a space of shared meaning-making, where those who live the realities being studied also shape how those realities are understood.

	Indicator	Explanation
1.	**Participation without shared purpose is forced participation.**	If people do not share the goal of the research, their involvement feels symbolic or imposed, no matter who they are.
2.	**Creating ownership is a continuous process.**	True ownership grows and changes as the research unfolds; people may question or even step away if they no longer connect with its purpose, and that is part of participation.
3.	**Power over knowledge shifts to the margins.**	People who are usually excluded, because of class, caste, gender, race, or poverty, must have the power to shape questions and meanings.
4.	**Action is both method and meaning.**	Action is not a final stage but part of the learning process; people act, reflect, and learn within their own contexts, while researchers learn alongside them.
5.	**Research questions must remain open to change.**	As people act and reflect, the original questions may evolve or transform - this flexibility keeps research closer to real life.
6.	**Knowledge is a shared creation and shared ownership**	When researchers and participants act, reflect, and interpret together, knowledge becomes a shared creation rather than anyone's private property.

Compass Point	Meaning
Power shift matters	Knowledge must move away from the control of the few and toward shared ownership by all.
Collective action matters	Real transformation is driven by groups and communities, not individuals alone.
Local context matters	Truth and insight emerge from lived experience, local history, and place.
Sindhanai (collective reflection) matters	Thinking and reflecting together turn experience into knowledge and knowledge into collective action.

Sindhanai

Sindhanai (சிந்தனை) is a Tamil word for critical thought; it is a political stance, it is a living invitation to reason. The term, as we use it, emerges from Periyarist philosophy — from a tradition where questioning is intrinsic to life; and blind obedience is a lethargy. Periyar, the rationalist, urged his believers to argue with him; to challenge him and also to re-make them through evidence, debate, and social transformation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) holds that same pulse. Each of its three words - Research, Action and Participation, echoes the Periyarist thoughts. Research calls for rational inquiry grounded in evidence, not stereotyped conditioning. Action insists that reason must unsettle old hierarchies and build equality. And Participation transforms both; making the act of reasoning itself a collective journey, where people think, act, and analyse together.

A patriarchal thought and a feminist thought, as part of PAR, would face completely different challenge when you set PAR in motion. Recognise that. Acknowledge that. PAR would often refuse to become part of a so mainstreamed Research frame, if its thoughts are rebellious to mainstream!

II. SHIFTING POWER THROUGH THE STAGES OF PAR CYCLE

PAR is a method that challenges the idea that research can be detached, or just an external observation. Instead, it insists that research is always entangled with power. Further, the work of PAR is not to discover power, but to shift that power. We have used four contemporary PAR toolkit to inform the stages in PAR. PAR as a cycle of actions can be understood through four stages: Framing the Inquiry, Action through Evidence, Making Meaning Together, Shifting Narratives and Shaping Power.

We can use a number of existing toolkits to reflect on these stages, *A Toolkit of Methods for Feminist Participatory Action Research* (Chakma, Godden, & Naidu, 2022), which centres gender justice and collective inquiry; the *Participatory Action Research: Guide for Facilitators* (Nurick & Apgar, 2014), which provides step-by-step support for community-led processes; and *A Toolkit for Participatory Action Research* (Hall et al., n.d.) from the Transnational Institute, which connects local struggles to global movements. Additionally, ECPAT International's (2024) *Training Manual on Participatory Action Research with Children* adapts these methods to ensure children's voices shape the research that affects them. Together, these resources demonstrate diverse ways of applying participatory principles across different contexts and communities.

FOUR STAGES

A. Framing the Inquiry

B. Action through Evidence

C. Making Meaning Together

D. Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power

FEMINIST PAR TOOLKIT

Communities identify WASH/climate issues; use mapping, storytelling, and feminist principles to define priorities and co-design projects.

Use feminist and creative tools: body mapping, photovoice, roleplay, surveys, journaling; data collection itself is empowering.

Collective feminist reflection on data; participants analyse experiences, identify power structures, and develop advocacy strategies.

Activism and advocacy central: research outputs feed into campaigns, movements, and community-led organising.

FOUR STAGES

CGIAR PAR GUIDE

A. Framing the Inquiry

Scoping & diagnosis: national and hub-level situation analysis, stakeholder consultation, community visioning and action planning.

B. Action through Evidence

Training facilitators, implementing community action plans, participatory monitoring (wealth ranking, diaries, indicators).

C. Making Meaning Together

Cross-village analysis workshops; reflection and review of action plans; thematic analysis and indicator development.

D. Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power

After-action reviews, knowledge fairs, and policy engagement; findings inform governance reforms.

FOUR STAGES

TNI PAR TOOLKIT

A. Framing the Inquiry

Visioning, theory of change, key actor analysis, identifying research questions; strong emphasis on context and governance.

B. Action through Evidence

Communities and researchers gather evidence using participatory tools; action is embedded in research itself (multi-loop learning).

C. Making Meaning Together

Joint interpretation of findings with communities; iterative cycles of reflection-action-reflection to sharpen strategies.

D. Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power

Findings channelled into advocacy for land rights and governance accountability; "virtuous circles" of reform.

FOUR STAGES	ECPAT PAR WITH CHILDREN MANUAL
A. Framing the Inquiry	Children and facilitators co-identify issues of concern (e.g., CSEA), design the project, and establish safe spaces for participation.
B. Action through Evidence	Children are trained as co-researchers; use drawings, focus groups, storytelling to gather evidence and perspectives.
C. Making Meaning Together	Children co-analyse results through guided reflection, identifying key themes and advocacy points.
D. Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power	Children lead dissemination through peer advocacy, campaigns, and policy dialogues.

References

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Hall, R., Brent, Z., Franco, J., Isaacs, M., & Shegro, T. (n.d.). A toolkit for participatory action research. Transnational Institute. https://www.tni.org

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A. Framing the PAR Inquiry

The first stage of Participatory Action Research (PAR) is about building the foundation for the work ahead. It is when we begin to define what the research will explore, how it will unfold, and who will be involved. In this stage, four aspects are especially important:

- **Setting the research goal** – Clarify what the study wants to understand or change, and how it connects to broader community or social realities.
- **Framing the research questions** – Identify what needs to be explored, what remains unknown, and which questions can stay open for communities to refine later.
- **Sketching a preliminary theory of change** – Since PAR links research with action, this step helps visualise how the inquiry might lead to shifts in understanding, behaviour, or systems. These pathways should stay flexible as the process evolves.
- **Designing the methodological frame** – Think about who will participate, how data will be collected, and how evidence will be analysed together with communities.

Understanding Who Controls the Research

At this point, most control is with the Principal Research team. They set the goals, framework, boundaries, and methods for the study. Many of these decisions are made before the community becomes directly involved, though early visits, conversations help shape initial ideas. This stage is when researchers begin to enter the field, meet people, listen, and build relationships that will guide the next steps.

Even though the research team leads this stage, participation can still begin here.

The key is for researchers to stay open and self-aware. Research team often claims this stage as bottom-up by involving communities. **However, involving communities in research and involving in the decision making process on research is two different things.** Involvement communities in decision making is a huge challenge, unless a community collective has commissioned the PAR.

If decision making spaces have to be expanded later, the research team must design the study in such a way that communities can later reshape questions, priorities, and meanings as they get more involved. It means two aspects: -

- Every decision made at this stage should be written down along with the reason behind it. This helps everyone later review and question those choices. Researchers should also understand the local and larger context and be aware of how power affects what counts as knowledge.
- This stage is also where ideology quietly enters the research. Conventional methods often encourage "neutrality" or "objectivity," but neutrality is not neutral. Neutrality often supports dominant ways of knowing and existing power structures. A PAR approach recognises that all knowledge is value-based and situated. The task is not to erase ideology but to make it visible, discuss it, and decide collectively how it shapes the inquiry. When researchers begin this way, the inquiry does not enter as an outside project. It becomes a living process that respects the potential participation of margins in research.

Four foundational tools help researchers and community partners build the above understanding:

Tool	Purpose and Use	Output
(a) Stakeholder Mapping	Helps identify who is part of the research, who holds control, and who influences decisions — directly or indirectly. Circles of different sizes and distances (Venn or *chappathi* diagram) show each actor's level of influence. The principal researcher or institution usually starts at the center to reflect the current power reality. This sets the stage for mapping the wider research ecosystem and redistributing influence later.	Stakeholder or Research Ecosystem Map
(b) Knowledge Ownership Matrix (2×2 Grid)	Encourages reflection on what researchers know, what communities know, what both know, and what neither knows. It helps expose assumptions and gaps, and reminds participants that all knowledge — academic or lived — holds value, though unequally recognized. The exercise should be done early to uncover blind spots and prompt humility and openness.	Knowledge Ownership Matrix
(c) Systems and Structures Mapping	Helps uncover the root causes behind the issues being studied. Using tools like the Problem Tree, Solution Tree, or Chess Tool, participants identify both oppressive systems (e.g., patriarchy, caste, capitalism) and supportive ones (e.g., solidarity networks, local institutions). This exercise reveals how structures and norms sustain problems beyond the individual level.	Systems Map or Relational Ecology Map
(d) Listening Walks	Grounds the research in lived realities. Researchers walk through community spaces — markets, worksites, homes — to listen and observe without structured tools. It helps them understand how power works in everyday life and whose experiences are visible or ignored. Walking with diverse companions expands perspective and reduces bias.	Field Reflections or Listening Notes

Together, these four tools help the research team build awareness and reflection before data collection begins. They expose who holds control and knowledge, how systems create barriers or opportunities, and how researchers' own positions shape what they see. These are Sindhanai (reflection) tools, meant for self-awareness and positionality (not yet for data collection). Their purpose is to help researchers make decisions based on evidence, not assumptions. Using them reminds the team that they are part of the field, not outside it. These tools make researchers confront how their own roles, institutions, and ideologies shape what they see and define as truth. In short, they are tools for negotiating positionality.

Framing Research Goals and Questions

The four foundational tools, namely stakeholder mapping, the knowledge ownership matrix, systems mapping, and listening walks, help researchers understand who holds power, what knowledge exists, and how lived realities shape inquiry. These tools move research from abstract intent to a demonstration of that intent on the ground. Information from these tools help framing goals and questions.

It is not easy to be prescriptive in setting research goals and questions. This is the space where we need **optimal rigidity with fluid flexibility**. There requires a clarity of direction without closing off possibilities. We often lean toward neutrality or excessive inclusiveness to avoid offending anyone, but in doing so, we risk losing the sharpness of purpose that participatory action research requires.

- A **research goal** in PAR must hold its ideological ground — it should clearly express what the research stands for, the values it upholds, and the kind of change it seeks. Yet, it must do so as an **invitation**, not an imposition. It should invite others, even from different worldviews, to imagine, interpret, and build upon that direction together.
- **Research questions**, in turn, act as a **call for action**. They translate the political intent of the goal into collective inquiry. Good questions do not just seek understanding; they invite responsibility. They ask what needs to change, who must act, and how systems and relationships can be transformed. In PAR, questions are not only tools of investigation but also instruments of mobilising action. They are designed to bring people into dialogue and to turn reflection into shared action.

Now, the challenge often is to word them.

To see how goals and questions can carry both vision and action, we can turn to two songs from the 1960s and 70s. Those were the times, when music became a way for communities to imagine and demand change. John Lennon's "Imagine" shows how to frame a research goal that is ideological yet inclusive. It invites listeners to picture a world beyond borders, possessions, and divisions. In the same way, a PAR goal could be worded as rooted in ideology, but expressed as an open invitation, not a fixed agenda. (Annexure 1)

Bob Dylan's **"The Times They Are A-Changin"** helps us see how to frame research questions that turn this vision into collective action. The song calls on all people, leaders, parents, writers to recognise that change is already happening, often led by those long unheard. Similarly, PAR questions should challenge and invite reflection: *What needs to shift in power, mindset, and relationships for real change to take root?* They should explore ongoing change rather than assume that research itself is the source of change. (Annexure 2)

Over the years, we have seen that the idea of **utopia** has been dismissed as unrealistic. Gail Omvedt, in *Seeking Begumpura*, reminds us that utopias are essential for equality. **Ravidas**'s vision of *Begumpura*, the "city without sorrow," was a political vision. It provides a direction of hope and justice. It invites us to reimagine power and belonging. In PAR, framing a research goal is such an act of utopian imagination. It envisions what justice, dignity, or solidarity could look like, while staying grounded in lived realities. Utopia here is not a destination but a direction to keep research critical, open, and inclusive. (Annexure 1)

Together, these songs remind us that research goals dream of the world we want to build, while research questions awaken those who must build it. One holds the vision; the other sparks the (collective) action.

Sketching the theory of change in and of PAR

From this starting point of shared imagination and collective action, we move to sketching the theory of change (ToC). We map how such visions and questions might begin to reshape understanding, behaviour, and systems. When we are framing the theory of change, we are framing the same for the PAR process itself, not only for what is being studied. The challenge is to maintain a porous wall between the *method of studying* and the *subject being studied*, allowing both to inform and reshape each other as the research unfolds. This permeability depends deeply on the positionality of the researchers; their social location, institutional identity, and ideological stance, all of which influence how they imagine change. In a PAR process, the theory of change, ideally, belongs not just to the principal researcher, but to all who take part in the inquiry and action. Every participant brings own view of what transformation means and how it might come about. In that sense, the theory of change needs to be fluid and dynamic.

The most significant step in evolving of the theory of change is the review of related literature. Many a time, research ends when we think it just begins. Most of us, knowingly or not, cherry-search and cherry-pick such literatures what we already know and agree with. By the time we finish our *review*, we have quietly built the framework for our conclusions.

Citing a text in research is never neutral. To cite is to legitimise. Unless we explicitly critique, a citation is an act of endorsement. And let us remember: citation is an industry. Citation is monetised, ranked, and rewarded. But what if the work we cite misrepresents the very people we are organising research with? What if it pathologises them, reduces them to stereotypes, or erases their resilience altogether? In an interview, Bagele Chilisa recalls a study by international collaborators that claimed the AIDS epidemic spread because "Batswana love sex." Her response: "When you are writing about Botswana, you are writing about me. You are saying this about me." She suggests taking such texts back to the community, reading them aloud with people, listening to their anger, their laughter, their rejection. Their collective critique must itself become part of the literature review.

In Participatory Action Research (PAR), we should not stop at compiling what journals say. We co-read with people. We share excerpts, even the uncomfortable ones from even our favourite ones, and invite critique. Critiques need not be oppositional alone, but also evolutionary. We listen as communities call out silences, distortions, and erasures. Then, we weave their oral histories, songs, proverbs, testimonies, artefacts, and everyday philosophies into the review. We need to place them on the same plane as "peer-reviewed" articles, and in doing so, we challenge the industry of citation itself.

A theory of change helps connect the change we hope to see with the means we choose to reach it. But in Participatory Action Research, this cannot be an assembly production-like plan of inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Change here is political, relational, and evolving.

A ToC that mirrors a logframe risks becoming a tool of control rather than reflection, making the collective justify a plan that serves funders' and principal research team's logic rather than evolving understanding of people's realities. In PAR, a living ToC begins with reflection. It asks who defines change, whose worldview shapes it, and what structures it challenges.

Most importantly, PAR recognises that the mainstream has its own bundles of "theories of change," often meant to preserve order, while collectives create a counter-theory that seeks justice, dignity, and structural transformation. A good ToC must therefore name its ideological roots, anticipate resistance, and stay flexible. It should track not only what changes but who learns, who questions, and who begins to share power.

A ToC in Participatory Action Research does not start on a blank slate. It begins by recognising that many theories of change already exist - those of the State, funders, academia, civil society, and communities themselves. The task is to map these existing theories to see what kinds of change each one assumes, who drives it, and who benefits from it.

Once this landscape is visible, the next step is to identify how PAR relates to them; which theories it embraces (because they align with values of justice and participation), which it challenges (because they reproduce hierarchy or control), and which it engages with critically (because they open spaces for dialogue and transformation). The process of examining and negotiating with these different theories is, in itself, the theory of change of PAR. It shows how PAR grows; not by rejecting all other frameworks, but by entering into thoughtful engagement with them, shifting power and purpose in the process. The next step, therefore, is to evolve this living ToC; one that captures how PAR continuously learns, contests, and redefines what meaningful change looks like.

Step	Purpose
Recognise Existing Theories of Change	To identify the different theories of change already shaping the context — from state, funders, academia, NGOs, and communities.
Map and Analyse Them	To understand what each theory values, who it benefits, and what power or ideology it carries.
Identify PAR's Relationship with Each	To see which theories PAR embraces, which it challenges, and which it critically engages with.
Document the Engagement Process	To make visible how PAR learns, adapts, and negotiates its stance through these engagements.
Present PAR's Living Theory of Change	Co-create a dynamic, reflective ToC that expresses how PAR continuously learns, contests, and transforms.

A Theory of Change often ends up being a theory of status quo — describing how things move, not how they transform. When written to satisfy funders or research hierarchy, it risks becoming a map of control rather than a journey of change. For social movements and participatory research, the real task is not only to write a theory of change, but to bring a change in theory (mainstream dominant) itself. Mainstream ToCs measure what is visible; collectivisation ToCs hold space for what is possible. They must remain open, political, and grounded; constantly asking whose change they serve and whose comfort they protect. The moment a ToC becomes fixed, it stops being a theory of change. In movements, therefore, ToC must shift from prediction to participation, from counting change to becoming change.

Sindhanai (2023). 'சிந்தனை (*Sindhanai*) *as Contemplative Pedagogy: Embedding Measurement in Collectivisation*'. Southern Voices for Global Development, October 2023, London.

Framing the Sample and Methodology in PAR

In Participatory Action Research (PAR), framing the sample and methodology is not a technical step. It is a political process. We make choices about who participates, how they engage, and what knowledge is valued. These choices shape the very nature of the action that is planned within the research. The four foundational exercises — stakeholder mapping, systems mapping, the knowledge ownership matrix, and listening walks — offer crucial insights for this stage.

Stakeholder mapping helps identify who must be part of the research and who needs encouragement or solidarity to participate actively in the "action" dimension of PAR. **Systems mapping** pushes this further, showing that sampling is not just about including individuals but also the worldviews they represent or contest. It urges us to think beyond demographic inclusion, namely, whether we include women or/and also include feminists, include Dalits or/and also those who stand for anti-caste worldviews; and to reflect on how ideology and standpoint shape representation.

The **knowledge ownership matrix** reminds us that methodology must enable knowledge sharing, not knowledge extraction. When research is co-learning, we need to identify all spaces and forms of dialogue and interaction, that would help us access them. We have to be more grounded, relational, and transparent about their limits. Finally, **listening walks** help researchers to attune themselves to the field's sensory cues - to notice what is said and unsaid, visible and hidden.

Together, these reflections guide the framing of samples and methodologies that keep the researcher within the field participating, learning, and co-creating; while ensuring that principal research team does not overtake the space, meaning, or voice of those most impacted/affected.

Tool	Creating and Sample	Designing and Methodology
Stakeholder Mapping	Identify who should be part of the research and who needs support to join. Ensure that different voices and 'power levels' are represented.	Plan how each group will take part in the research and action. Keep inclusion active, not symbolic.
Knowledge Ownership Matrix	Include people who represent different worldviews, not just social groups. For example, both women and feminists, Dalits and anti-caste allies.	Understand how these standpoints shape the process. Make sure the research does not reproduce existing hierarchies.
Systems and Structures Mapping	Include people with different kinds of knowledge — lived, technical, local, and professional.	Create spaces for co-learning and dialogue where everyone can share and question knowledge.
Listening Walks	Find out whose voices or experiences are often missed and bring them into the research.	Enter field with sensitivity. Learn by observing, listening, and feeling, not only by asking questions.

B. Action through Evidence

Stage two is when research begins to move into action — the space where learning and change take shape together. This is not only about doing, but about noticing, questioning, and learning through what unfolds. When peer researchers, especially people with lived experience, lead this phase, they turn ideas into practice and practice into new understanding.

Action in participatory research can begin in many ways. Sometimes it starts quietly- a conversation, a meeting, or a small act that changes how people think. At other times, it takes visible form-a campaign, a health drive, a cooperative, or a local experiment. Some actions are individual, others collective. They may work through schools, unions, or health centres, or connect with larger efforts that already carry energy for change. Each is a valid way of acting on evidence.

Different people move at different speeds. Some actions fit within existing systems, others push against them. Some pause, others grow. This is not failure. It is how change happens. What matters is keeping the cycle of **reflection → action → reflection** alive.

In this stage, three crucial decisions are made for the Principal Research Team:

Entry of the research into the field: If the field is, for example, a village, its geography and people are not necessarily known to the research team. Should the research enter through NGOs already working there? In that case, the research may carry all the baggage, good and bad, of that organisation, and over time may also create new baggage for the NGO. Or should the principal researchers themselves enter directly? They begin conversations, slowly build relationships, and create trust among

people? Building trust for oneself is one thing; building trust for the research is another. Sometimes we first create trust in ourselves and then extend that to the research. Will that work? It might, but is it sustainable?

Research entering the action participants: This is when the inquiry begins to find people who connect with the research. These are such people who care about the issue, feel affected by it, or see potential for change, and who begin to shape the direction of learning and action. Unlike other forms of research, PAR has an action component built into it. The local team must understand the problem, feel the problem, and act on it as if it is their own — as if they genuinely want solutions. But what kind of action is expected? Do we want people to act on their own problems, on the village's collective problems, or on the problems of others?

If it is their own problem, they may already be seeking solutions. Their lives themselves become part of the research. If it is the village's problem, people may need to come together to act collectively. But communities may be at different stages. Some may have tried before and are now tired; others may lack time, energy, or resources to unite. In some contexts, dominant forces may even deny them the space to organise.

The challenge for the research team, then, is to enter not just the field but in the critical thinking process of those people, so that it encourages thoughtful, deliberate action rather than impulsive response.

Practising Praxis: The third decision is to ensure that action is not instinctive but grounded in evidence — carried out through a planned and reflective process. The action team must follow a continuous cycle of research → action → reflection, with each stage informed by evidence and experience.

Why is this important? Because PAR is not only about generating local knowledge. It also seeks to understand what kinds of evidence lead to change and how. When we recommend a solution, we must ask: Is it based on facts and lived experience? Does it actually work? Will it hold in other contexts, or only here? These reflective questions are what get answered through PAR — and this is what makes PAR different from collective action, a campaign, or an implementation programme.

Forms of Action in PAR

In a discussion in a workshop with sanitation workers group, evolving models of actions in a PAR, we evolved these six models of actions.

Spark

Action emerges naturally from participation. Reflection, dialogue, or documentation trigger small, unplanned changes in people's everyday lives.

Driven by: Individuals or small groups.

Individual Catalysts

AA few peer researchers use what they have learned to change their own practice or surroundings. Their actions become part of PAR process.

Driven by: Individual agency.

Unique Action Circle

A group forms to plan, act, and reflect together. They take small, repeated steps. They learn from each action before moving forward again.

Driven by: Collective agency built through group reflection

Mosaic–Convergence

Different people or groups with different mandates act in their own spaces but stay connected. Over time, their efforts begin to align and strengthen each other.

Driven by: Networked individuals working toward shared goals

Institution–Harbour

Existing organisations or institutions take up the research evidence and integrate it into their decisions or programmes.

Driven by: Institutional or organisational agency

Rebel–Harbour

Research connects with movements or campaigns already fighting for justice. The evidence strengthens their message and reach.

Driven by: Collective, activist networks

Across all these forms, what matters is that the cycle of reflection → action → reflection stays alive. This is praxis. Action does not have to be large to matter. A small change in practice can open the door to much deeper change. Not all actions move at the same pace. Some build slowly, others take off quickly. Every experience, even one that seems like a failure, adds to collective understanding. Sindhanai (reflection) is as vital as action itself.

Participatory Tools for Action and Reflection

Defining community is never a neutral act. It is about power. A community forms when an identity becomes politicised, shaped not only by belonging but by the shared recognition of injustice. In participatory action research, community participates in research through reflection, struggle, and solidarity. Drawing from Ambedkar's infection of imitation, Freire's conscientisation, Marx's class struggle, Gramsci's organic intellectuals, Hooks's interlocking oppressions, and Mbembe's right to opacity, community is understood as both a site of resistance and creation. Collective reflection, rooted in Periyarist rational thought, embodies this process by turning knowledge into shared ownership and research into collective transformation. In this sense, community is merely not found but shaped through power, questioning, and the action to reimagine realities from the ground up. (Read Annexure 3)

There is a wide range of participatory tools, namely, mapping tools, analysis tools, scoring and ranking tools, and many others, that principal researchers need to be familiar with. These tools help local participant researchers learn how to collect evidence effectively. In addition, there are **micro-planning tools** that help researchers guide action teams in planning actions based on evidence. And there are **reflection tools**, which support collective learning from each stage of action. Local researchers need to be capacitated to confidently use them, adapt them, and make them their own. (See Annexure 4)

C. Reflection, Analysis, and Meaning-Making

In Stage two, the process may have felt democratised with multiple groups, individuals, and even institutions carrying out action research in their own ways. Different methods were used; different voices found expression. But now, in **Stage Three**, all of that must be brought together. The principal research team faces the task of making sense of what has unfolded; to trace meaning across many actions, experiences, and interpretations. It is like opening a television set to repair it: every part is now out in the open, wires exposed, circuits scattered across the table. Each piece matters, but they only come alive when fitted together again. This stage is about closing it well; reconnecting the pieces, ensuring nothing is lost, and restoring the wholeness of what has been taken apart and transformed.

> **"A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this — that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax."**
>
> **— Karl Marx, Capital, Volume I**

Marx's idea of human labour, that humans envision before they make, offers a powerful way to enter Stage Three of participatory research. It reminds us that every act of creation begins in imagination of the construct that is in the minds of people. At this stage, as research turns toward reflection and analysis, we need to recognise that each participant researcher is an architect in their own right. Everyone carries their own imagination of the world, of the issue being studied, and of what the research means. When these imaginations meet, research becomes more than the sum of its data; it becomes a collective act of envisioning.

We are not asking bees or ants to build a honeycomb as imagined by the principal research team. We are trying to make meaning from the different designs already forming in people's minds- the structures of thought, experience, and hope that each person brings. Meaning-making in PAR is not about constructing one perfect honeycomb; it is about acknowledging that each design reveals a distinct way of seeing, knowing, and imagining change.

Hence, the challenge is not just technical, it is deeply political. How should communities be involved in analysis? Should representatives be chosen, or should participation be open to anyone? Should analysis rest with the core team alone? Or, in today's age, should digital tools or even Artificial Intelligence be used to detect patterns? Each of these decisions reflects a politics of knowledge, about who is allowed to interpret, whose experience counts as data, and what kind of truth we privilege.

Mainstream research often demands "unbiased" analysis, but in practice, that often means aligning with dominant epistemologies. In PAR, the question of participation, of different people, views, and ideologies, is a challenge. It is about whose bias is being centred, and whose worldview shapes the analysis? This is the stage where positionality becomes most visible. Should not meaning-making privilege the voices of the most marginalised, even if it distorts the "normal pattern"? Or should it seek neutrality, knowing that neutrality often aligns with mainstream power? These are difficult questions; ones we often refuse to engage with, yet they lie at the heart of participatory research. Knowledge, like action, remains alive and contested.

The Dilemma of Apples and Oranges

At this stage, every PAR team faces the same dilemma: how to compare and analyse across diverse experiences? Different communities, contexts, and actions rarely align neatly. They are apples and oranges, in fact all fruits have a pericarp- a shared structure that holds their distinct forms together. Similarly, all findings that we have got through the research will have certain connection- which went through cycles of reflection, evidence, and action. This synthesis process, in a way, should continue in wider group.

We encourage researchers to think of this stage as looking at cars in the making. Many people and groups are contributing in making this car. Some make only wheels, some make engines, some help it run on the road. Conventional research looks for respondents who can describe the parts they are making- the screws, the doors, the engines; and the principal research team assembles them. But in PAR, everyone who is part of the making to envision the car

itself , that is, people who see how their own story fits into the larger design of change; and shape the larger design itself. This shift, from describing parts to that of imagining wholes, is what gives meaning to collective analysis.

Nothing About Us, Without Us

At the heart of Stage Three lies a simple but radical principle: *Nothing About Us, Without Us.*

It challenges the conventional idea that data belong to researchers and interpretation belongs to experts. In PAR, analysis itself becomes a shared space: one, where evidence returns to the people it came from, and meaning is created through dialogue, disagreement, and imagination. This principle does not only invite communities to participate in analysis; *it tries to define what participation means.* It needs to ask: who gets to name patterns? Who decides which realities matter? And how can the process of interpretation become an act of empowerment rather than extraction?

Different PAR traditions have developed their own ways of living this principle. Some examples include:

Formation of collective reflection circles: In feminist participatory research, analysis is a collective act of reflection. Small groups of women, workers, or community members come together to discuss what the data mean in their lived realities. Through these circles, they identify patterns of inequality and power, and transform their insights into advocacy strategies. Here, the process of analysis is as important as the results. The act of interpreting data becomes a moment of reclaiming voice and authority over one's own experience. Meaning is not extracted; it is co-created and politicised.

Read Chakma, T., Godden, N. J., & Naidu, K. (2022). Toolkit of methods for feminist participatory action research. Oxfam.

Cross-village analysis workshops: In many PAR traditions such as the CGIAR model, representatives from different action sites meet to reflect, compare, and review findings. Each site brings its own context, challenges, and innovations. Through dialogue, shared indicators and themes emerge. This process respects diversity while building common understanding. It shows that "*Nothing About Us, Without Us*" does not mean every voice must say the same thing; it means every voice shapes the frame through which meaning is seen. The synthesis that follows is not a statistical average — it is a dialogue among contexts, grounded in lived evidence. Read Nurick, R., & Apgar, M. (2014). Participatory action research: Guide for facilitators. Penang, Malaysia: CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems. (Manual: AAS-2014-46)

Joint interpretation sessions: Some approaches, such as those used by TNI, bring researchers and communities together for multiple rounds of reflection–action–reflection. Each round deepens understanding and refines strategy. Knowledge here is never fixed — it moves back and forth between insight and action. Returning data to communities recognises that evidence has life only when it continues to circulate among those who created it. Read- Hall, R., Brent, Z., Franco, J., Isaacs, M., & Shegro, T. (n.d.). A toolkit for participatory action research. Transnational Institute. https://www.tni.org

Guided reflection sessions: In approaches like ECPAT's, participants — including children or other marginalised groups — are guided through reflection to identify key themes, recognise shared experiences, and frame advocacy messages in their own words. This ensures that the next stage of advocacy emerges directly from those most affected. Read ECPAT International. (2024). Training manual: Participatory action research with children. ECPAT International.

Across all these methods, the principle of *Nothing About Us, Without Us* stands on four key pillars:
- Participation of all, with special focus on those at the margins;
- Participation across different stages — through iteration and re-iteration;
- Participation of views and ideas, not merely of people;
- Guidance through a progressive and reflective lens.

The last is the most challenging. This is where positionality enters the research room. When positionality aligns with mainstream thinking, it gains immediate acceptance. When it speaks only in the language of political correctness, it becomes loud but not transformative.

The real challenge is subtler: even within a room full of marginalised voices, some perspectives remain faint, unheard, or unrecognised. Should we try to "mainstream" them; or would that erase what makes them distinct? There may be no clear answer. What matters is to recognise that this happens, and to ask: Who will capture that knowledge? How will it be captured?

Much of mainstream epistemology is built precisely on what it does not record. The knowledge that sits in silences- half-formed thoughts, emotional hesitations, disagreements- often disappears because our methods are not designed to hold them. This is why epistemology must be guided by what we need to measure anew, not the other way around. The need to measure new forms of change must be fuelled by reflection. Most participatory tools- whether the Problem Tree, Force Field, or even Chess Analysis- take us to structural issues. But to imagine that the structures we study do not influence us, simply because we as researchers feel powerful or autonomous, is perhaps the greatest myth of all. Participatory research calls us to see ourselves within the very systems we study — not outside them.

D. Shifting Narratives, Shaping Power

This is the stage where findings are mobilised for wider impact. Reports, campaigns, and dissemination activities are designed to inform policy, strengthen programmes, and influence practice. Outputs are tailored for different audiences- from policymakers to grassroots actors, to ensure that learning from the field travels, resonates, and contributes to change. At this stage, the research cycle connects most directly to tangible outcomes. Knowledge becomes action once more- shaping decisions, influencing systems, and being reinvested into new cycles of inquiry and learning.

Yet, this stage is always contested. Whose voices are amplified? Who controls the narrative? When researchers alone control dissemination, communities risk becoming case studies: their agency reduced, their struggles simplified. A decolonising PAR refuses this.

Stage Four has to be seen differently. It is not about closing the loop. It is about opening new struggles. It is where research disrupts silences, reshapes public narratives, and fuels organising. At its core, Stage Four is the politics of voice. The litmus test of success is simple yet difficult: Has there been a shift in power? Has there been a shift in narrative?

Key Considerations:

- Recognise that this stage begins not after the research ends, but the moment it starts to move beyond the primary team (stage 2). Every interaction, dialogue, presentation, or report carries a potential ripple. Dissemination begins in subtle ways, in the stories we tell, the drafts we share, and the relationships we build.

- Acknowledge that not all dissemination will remain within our control. Once knowledge is shared, it takes on a life of its own. People may claim parts of it, reinterpret it, or use it for purposes different from what was intended. What matters is to have a space for conversation around anticipating these movements- on understanding how knowledge may travel, and who might claim it.

- Dissemination flows through diverse pathways: policy briefs, media stories, campaigns, art, workshops, and community meetings. Not all carry equal legitimacy in the eyes of mainstream institutions, but each holds its own meaning and influence for different audiences. Recognising and valuing these multiple pathways ensures that dissemination remains democratic rather than hierarchical.

- Moreover, as findings emerge, it becomes crucial to distinguish between insights that align with the dominant mainstream and those that challenge or resist it. Research that questions existing hierarchies or power structures often risks being ignored, diluted, or selectively appropriated — when institutions adopt what is convenient and silence what is uncomfortable. To prevent this, research teams must develop strategies to protect, amplify, and sustain counter-narratives — the findings that speak truth to power. Ask continually: If the mainstream owns this research, what will be lost?

- Finally, plan deliberate acts of voice restitution, ensuring that those who generated the knowledge also author its public meaning. This is the core of participatory dissemination. Because, ultimately, dissemination is not a neutral step — it is a political act.

Examples from PAR Traditions:

Different traditions of participatory research offer ways to live this politics of dissemination while keeping power and voice in balance.

- In **Feminist PAR tool,** dissemination itself becomes an act of organising. Research outputs do not end up as reports on shelves but flow directly into campaigns, movements, and community-led advocacy. Here, the boundary between research and activism disappears — knowledge becomes a tool for mobilisation, visibility, and solidarity.
- In the **CGIAR toolkit,** dissemination takes the form of **after-action reviews, knowledge fairs, and governance dialogues**. Evidence is used to strengthen institutional systems and inform policy decisions, turning local learning into reform processes. These forums serve as meeting points where field realities speak to power structures, ensuring that what is learned in communities reshapes governance practice.
- The **Transnational Institute (TNI)** toolkit uses dissemination to build accountability and collective power. Findings are channeled into advocacy for land rights, environmental justice, and governance reforms, forming what they describe as "virtuous circles" — where research continuously feeds back into activism, and activism reshapes further research. In this approach, knowledge is always on the move — alive, political, and unfinished.
- In **ECPAT's participatory research with children**, dissemination is led by the children themselves. They interpret findings through guided reflection, identify key advocacy messages, and present them in peer campaigns, media interactions, and dialogues with

policymakers. Their participation transforms dissemination from presentation into empowerment — children become both the storytellers and the story-holders.

Across these traditions, the message is clear: dissemination is not a technical output but a continuation of participation through voice and visibility. Whether through campaigns, dialogues, or reforms, each approach insists that knowledge must travel with the people who created it, not apart from them.

An example of this politics of dissemination in practice is the Ground Level Panel (GLP) organised by **Praxis** and the **Institute of Development Studies (IDS)**. Conceived as a mirror to the United Nations' High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the Ground Level Panel brought together people with lived experience of poverty to deliberate on global development priorities — in their own terms, through their own methods, and in their own voices. Unlike conventional expert panels, the GLP did not *collect* community opinions for validation elsewhere. It *produced* analysis, vision, and recommendations — grounded in lived realities yet speaking directly to global institutions. Through local dialogues, collective reflection, and facilitated synthesis, the panel reframed the meaning of development from the standpoint of those most affected by its policies.

This approach represents the essence of Stage Four: *Shifting Narratives, Shifting Power*. It demonstrates that dissemination is not about showcasing findings, but about creating spaces where new publics emerge- where those usually heard last are placed first, and where knowledge travels horizontally. Just as the Ground Level Panel reversed the usual hierarchy of voice and authority, participatory research at this stage must also ask: Who gets to author public meaning? Who sits at the table when knowledge meets power? When dissemination invites the grassroots to interpret, to speak, and to represent; when meaning moves from the ground to the global, research stops being a report and becomes a movement of critical reflection. That is the promise of participatory research: not to close the loop, but to keep it alive, where every new act of reflection begins another cycle of action and change.

III. WATCH-OUTS

In the stage of Framing the Inquiry, Participatory Action Research must begin with Sindhanai — critical reflection. It is reflection that turns participation into learning. Without it, research in health easily becomes a technical exercise in data collection. Every research design and framing decision gives power to someone; therefore, action is never neutral. Researchers must ask whose priorities define the study — for example, whether a maternal-health project reflects women's lived experiences or institutional performance targets.

Participation itself is not automatically critical. Communities may attend meetings or respond to surveys without questioning the power structures that shape their access to care. To make participation transformative, the process must include structured dialogue and collective reasoning.

Leadership must grow from within communities. In health settings, peer educators and local volunteers act as "organic intellectuals," connecting daily struggles to systemic reform. Their leadership ensures that reflection remains grounded in lived experience.

Dialogue must be treated as a method, not a supporting activity. In tuberculosis or reproductive-health programmes, for instance, open discussion between patients, workers, and managers helps uncover how stigma, work conditions, and policy intersect.

In the stage of Action through Evidence, researchers must remember that representation can never be through a process of reductionism. Simplifying complex realities into statistics can erase the voices of those who fall outside the averages. For example, reporting that "most mothers accessed antenatal care" may hide the exclusion of tribal women or migrant workers. Participatory tools should capture diversity and contradiction.

PAR must guard against false participation. Many health projects use the language of empowerment but continue to centralise decisions in expert hands. Authentic participation allows communities to define problems and influence responses, not merely validate plans.

Neutrality must be recognised as a political stance. Health research that claims to be "objective" often aligns with biomedical or institutional priorities. Acknowledging positionality — such as stating a feminist or rights-based lens — is not bias; it is transparency.

In the later stages of Making Meaning Together and Shifting Narratives, control over voice must be shared. Findings should be interpreted and communicated jointly with communities. In a nutrition or vaccination project, this may mean community groups co-authoring reports, leading dissemination events, or creating their own data visuals. Such practices restore ownership of knowledge.

Dissemination should never signal closure. Reports and outputs are moments of pause, not the end of inquiry. Each finding should open new questions for reflection and action — for instance, how community recommendations are taken up by local health systems.

Participatory Action Research must continue as a living process. When Sindhanai, critical reflection, persists beyond the study, PAR sustains a rhythm of learning and change. It moves from documenting health realities to transforming them, ensuring that research remains accountable to the people whose lives it seeks to understand.

ANNEXURE 1: LYRICS

Imagine
John Lennon · 1971

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky

Imagine all the people
Livin' for today
Ah

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too

Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace
You

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world
You

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

The Times They Are A-Changin'
Bob Dylan

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll
sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
There's a battle outside and it is ragin'
It'll soon shake your windows and rattle
your walls
For the times they are a-changin'

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you can't
lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

Begumpura
Sant Ravidas, 14th Century

The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,
No taxes or cares, none owns property there,
no wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.
Oh, my brother, I've come to take it as my own,
my distant home where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
where none are third or second – all are one;
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,
those who walk beside me are my friends.

Source: https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/begumpura-the-anarchist-commune/

ANNEXURE 2: EVOLVING THEORY OF CHANGE IN PAR

Stage	Conventional	PAR
1. **Search &** **Compile**	Gather published academic sources (journals, books, reports). Identify dominant theories and gaps.	Whose voices are represented? Whose knowledge is missing? Map biases, stereotypes, and silences. Note which literatures you may hesitate to legitimise.
2. **Review &** **Summarise**	Researcher reads and synthesises existing work into a narrative.	Share excerpts (especially deficit or stereotyping ones) with communities. Invite critique: Does this describe you? What is missing? Record community responses.
3. **Identify the** **Gap**	Define what existing scholarship hasn't studied; position the project to "fill" this gap.	The gap is not only an absence of study but also distortion or erasure in academic literature.
4. **Write the** **Synthesis**	Draft the synthesis, citing authoritative sources to establish credibility.	Weave in oral traditions, songs, testimonies, artefacts, and critiques. Present community knowledge alongside journal articles as equally valid.
6. **Contribution**	Adds value to the scholarly canon by filling a research gap.	Transforms the canon itself: explicitly state which literatures are legitimised, which are critiqued, and how community voices have reshaped the field.

ANNEXURE 3: DEFINING 'COMMUNITY' IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Defining community is never a neutral exercise; it is always about power. While Raymond Williams called it a "warmly persuasive" word and Benedict Anderson described it as imagined through shared memory or exclusion, the idea becomes clearer when seen through lens of power. A community is any group living on the wrong side of power. The moment an identity becomes politicised, a community begins to form, shaped not merely by belonging but by the shared recognition of injustice. Sometimes even one sanitation woman worker, carrying the intersecting identities of Dalit, woman, and sanitation worker, embodies multiple political communities and becomes a community in herself. Identifying a community is never just labelling; it is a political act that maps power — who decides, who benefits, and who remains unseen. Community is not fixed but a process, evolving from perception to shared struggle to collective agency. To name is to acknowledge history and injustice; to listen is to hear beyond words shaped by social conditioning and fear. In participatory research, both naming and listening become acts of justice — recognising voices, silences, and the quiet power of becoming.

When a research organises participatory research, just participation of community is not enough. There are a number of anti-colonial concepts that help us understand what happens beneath many of those silences, hesitations, and borrowed words. The infection of imitation (B.R. Ambedkar) reminds us how the oppressed internalise the oppressor's culture, mistaking imitation for dignity; liberation begins when that imitation gives way to self-respect and the imagination of new social relations. The process of conscientisation (Paulo Freire) pushes research beyond data collection toward collective reflection that exposes the structures shaping people's lives. The lens of class formation and class struggle (Karl Marx) reveals research needs to understand that inequality is not accidental but organised and sustained through control of thought, labour, and resources. Those organised patterns of oppression as well as resistance need to be understood. Within every struggle stand organic intellectuals (Antonio Gramsci) — those, like a sanitation woman worker marked by caste, gender, and occupation, who theorise life from experience and transform awareness into action. Interlocking oppressions (bell hooks) show that caste, class, gender, and race reinforce one another, demanding intersectional ways of seeing. Finally, the right to opacity (Achille Mbembe) reminds researchers that not all truths must be made visible: silence, metaphor, and coded expression can themselves be acts of protection and knowledge. Together, these ideas insist that participatory research is not about extracting stories but about standing with people as they reclaim the power to name, interpret, and transform their own realities.

All these are embodied within the concept Sindhanai, which comes from Periyarist tradition of rational thinking. The challenge lies not only in the field but within research itself. The colonial architecture of knowledge (Achille Mbembe) still determines what counts as truth, rewarding neatness over discomfort and compliance over critique. Decolonising research demands thinking from the ground up, allowing new languages, logics, and epistemologies to breathe. Even within research teams, alienation (Karl Marx) persists — where field researchers collect stories, others interpret and publish them, and inquiry becomes extraction rather than collaboration. To make research truly participatory, knowledge must become shared ownership, where everyone — from field to reflection — is a co-thinker and co-creator. When power, reflection, class, intersectionality, opacity, and shared authorship come together, community is no longer something to be found; it is something to be created — through power, struggle, and reflection.

ANNEXURE 4: PARTICIPATORY TOOLS

Category	Main Purpose	Examples of Tools	PAR Stage Alignment
1. Diagnostic & Exploratory	Understand context, map systems, identify problems	Problem Tree, Venn Diagram, Transect Walk	Stage 1 – Framing the Inquiry
2. Analytical & Planning	Prioritise issues, plan evidence-based actions	Solution Tree, Scoring Matrix, SWOT, Force-Field Analysis, Seasonality and time Mapping, Mobility mapping	Stage 2 – Action through Evidence
3. Reflective & Monitoring	Reflect, analyse meaning, capture change	Timeline Review, Most Significant Change, Reflection Circles	Stage 3 – Reflection & Meaning
4. Dissemination & Influence	Share, mobilise, and politicise findings	Participatory Video, Digital Story telling, Knowledge Fairs, Ground-Level Panels	Stage 4 – Shifting Narratives & Power

ANNEXURE 5: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Artificial Intelligence can help participatory research to make it efficient- faster transcription, quicker pattern recognition, seamless collation. It promises to save time. And it does. But as researchers began to engage with it more closely, one thing became clear: pattern-making itself is political.

When a researcher poses a question to AI in a neutral tone, the response aligns with dominant frameworks. But when the same question is asked from the standpoint of an anti-caste feminist, everything shifts. The tone, the hierarchy of importance, even the moral grammar of the answer. The AI's default, like most systems in which we work, is neither feminist nor anti-caste. It is shaped by patriarchy and capitalism, trained on the data and worldviews of those who have historically held power.

The question, therefore, is not whether AI is biased. It is whether we have the courage to name the direction of that bias, and still have the capacity to use the tool wisely. Once positionality is declared clearly, AI begins to "see" differently. It can be made self-aware. Guided through feminist, anti-caste, or worker-centred lenses, AI begins to reveal the unevenness of the world itself- not as error, but as evidence of what remains unjust. It is possible unless the user has the intent to do that. AI would not do any of these in a default way.

At the same time, AI has quietly shifted the rhythms of research. It frees human time from mechanical tasks. Research, too, has its caste system: those who "process" and those who "interpret." AI has the potential, if there is an intent, to decaste and declass this structure, to democratise the act of theorising, allowing more people, peer researchers, field workers, participants, to see patterns and ask why.

AI also offers a way to challenge the old information asymmetry between researcher and respondent. Traditionally, researchers hold knowledge but share little, while expecting participants to share everything. The excuse has been that giving too much information "biases" the respondent. But bias flows both ways. Researchers also cherry-pick, interpreting the world through their own assumptions. If there is an intent with research team, AI can help rebalance this. It can translate and simplify information so that participants can engage with it meaningfully. When used consciously, it can equalise the dialogue.

Yet the danger lies in seduction. AI makes research appear faster, cleaner, smoother. But in that comfort, something essential may be lost. The pauses, the doubts, the awkward silences that trigger search for new realities. Silence is data. Discomfort is method. When machines tidy our thoughts, they risk sterilising them. The danger is not that AI will dominate; it is that it will please.

Using AI ethically in research requires a shift in imagination. The goal is not to make researchers more "AI-literate," but to make the machine more person-literate. AI must learn to read questions through the lens of justice, equality, and care. It should not be treated as apolitical.