



THE ACTION RESEARCH GUIDEBOOK

'Progress is only possible by working together'

December 2019



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Acronyms

AOP	Annual Operational Plan
AR	Action Research
CDP	Capacity Development Partnership
DOE	District Office of Education
DoPo	Department of Policy
EMA	Education Management Advisor
EMF	Education Management Facilitator
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport
POE	Provincial Office of Education
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
ToR	Term of Reference
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

Introduction

Action research has been applied in education context as a systematic inquiry that actors such as teachers, school directors, and other duty bearers like DOE and POE conduct through undertaking research process. The main purpose is to evaluate their own actions in areas of teaching, professional pathway, planning and school or institution management about how well they have been done so far or what is working well or not working well and what should be improved. Action research requires active participation and involvement of education actors in changing situations and enhancing quality of strategic plans, policies and practices so it can be undertaken by large or small groups with additional assistance from professional researchers for increasing the quality and efficiency of the result.

This guidebook is developed for use by teachers, school directors, and duty bearers like DOEs and POEs as well as relevant government officials in the education sector at sub-national level. It can be adapted and used as a tool in undertaking research whilst; simultaneously, equipping their capacity for better quality of teaching, education planning and management. There have been several consultations with internal and external stakeholders such education management advisers (EMA), education management facilitators (EMF) and program staff in CDP project of VSO Cambodia, along with UNICEF and MoEYS (DoPo) with aim to ensure the consistence, alignment, adaptability and effectiveness of implementation. Action research is

a new concept for Cambodia so this guidebook is produced under critical consideration with simple language and methods or approaches to fit the context.

What is Action Research?

Action Research (AR) is a process that improves education system by incorporating and involving education actors (teachers, school directors) and duty bearers (DOEs, POEs and government officials) working together to improve their schools, institutions and professional areas through appropriate study, data gathering, critical analysis, quality of planning, effective implementation and evaluation with routine reflection.

Action research can be called a “cycle of action” because it normally follow the same process – such as identify core problem, develop research plan, collect data, analyze data, embed the findings into planning, implement and monitor and evaluate the actions then education researchers repeat the process. Based on the process and approaches of action research, education actors and members of a school or an institute are often empowered to make changes for their classrooms, entire school or institution (i.e. curriculum, lesson plan, AOP and ESP, education policy) to maximum the impact.

In short, this guidebook can be a powerful tool in strengthening education system due to its principles, approaches, and framework to make education researchers envision issues broadly and address them appropriately with comprehensive ideas and solutions via reliable data from the research they conducted. Action research can be used to increase community’s voice, participation and dialogue in improving their own local education.

Chapter 1: Action Research Principles

In principles, action research is categorized into 4 different types which are aimed to increase the volume of change:

Individual Research: This refers to research conducted by one education actor (teacher or school director) or staff member (DoE or PoE). This type of research is conducted to analyze a specific task. For example, a teacher/school director thinks of group activities in a classroom that will help improve productive learning. Then they begin to develop their own research to gather the information. After they get the results they may discard some activities as unhelpful and then replace them with new teaching approaches based on key findings and recommendations.

ii. **Collaborative Research:** This is a team research. Typically, more than one person are involved in collaborative research and they may come from the different offices/classes in a particular school but they must have a common interest in a specific topic. This type of research often consists of teachers and school principals working together and offers more benefits than individual research.

iii. **School-wide Research:** When research is conducted for an entire school, it is called school-wide research. For this type of action research, a school may have concerns about a school-wide problem. This can be lack of parental involvement or it could be research to increase the students' performance in a certain subject. The entire staff works together through this research to study the

problem, implement changes, and correct the problem or to hopefully increase the students' performance.

iv. **District/Province-wide Research:** District/province-wide research is used for schools in an entire district or province. This type of action research is usually more community-based than the other types because it targets community people (parent, school support committee, and local authority) rather than students or education actors as respondents. This type may also be used to address organizational problems within the entire district or province. This is the current practices in provinces and districts of CDP project and DOEs and POE are formed to be AR team to discover and address issues in their own locations.

Based on the action research design, three levels of change are created:

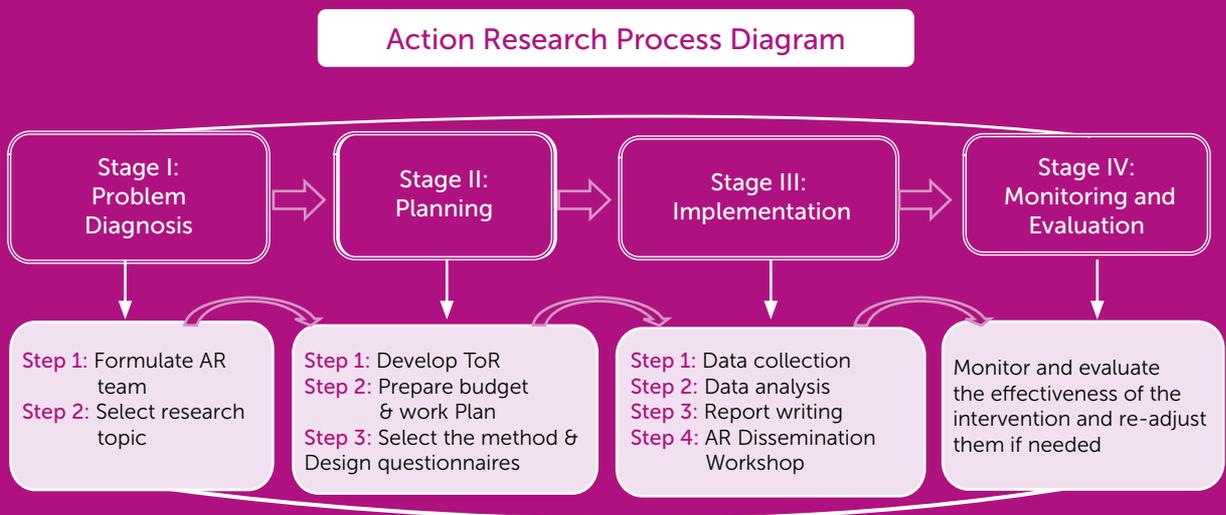
(1) **Individual Change:** This refers to self-change of the person who conducted the research. This person is seeking a better understanding of the effects of their actions and to improve their work in their own lives.

(2) **Classroom and School Change:** The second level is a collective process of understanding about the issue and effect of the problem in order to create changes and correct mistakes or increase performance in a classroom or school.

(3) **Community and Organization Change:** Action research works to increase a community's voice in addressing community issues or organizational problems across the entire district/province in order to achieve a program's goal or the vision of an organization.

Chapter 2: Design Process of Action Research

Action research consists of 4 stages and each stage has the following steps. The diagram below shows the cycle of action research.



Stage I: Problem Diagnosis

Step 1: Formulate AR Team

Individual research is not always appropriate. If it is not, you must think of formulating a team. A team can be collaborative research or school-wide research or district/province-wide research; thus, selecting team members is vitally important.

A collaborative research team requires at least 2 members from different offices/classes in a school to investigate a particular topic or issue. The purpose is to improve a professional pathway or to examine their own performance. The team size should not be more than 3.

For school-wide research, the team is a bit bigger than for collaborative research due to the research scope is an entire school. Hence, the team should comprise 3 – 5 actors in order to share roles and responsibilities along with the comprehensive ideas and recommendations.

For district/province-wide research, staff from each school in the district/province collaborates in researching the problem and finding ways to improve the situation so the team should have at least 5 – 10 members so they can cover all target areas or schools in a district or province.

In a research team, there are usually 3 roles: team leader, facilitator and note keeper. The team leader is

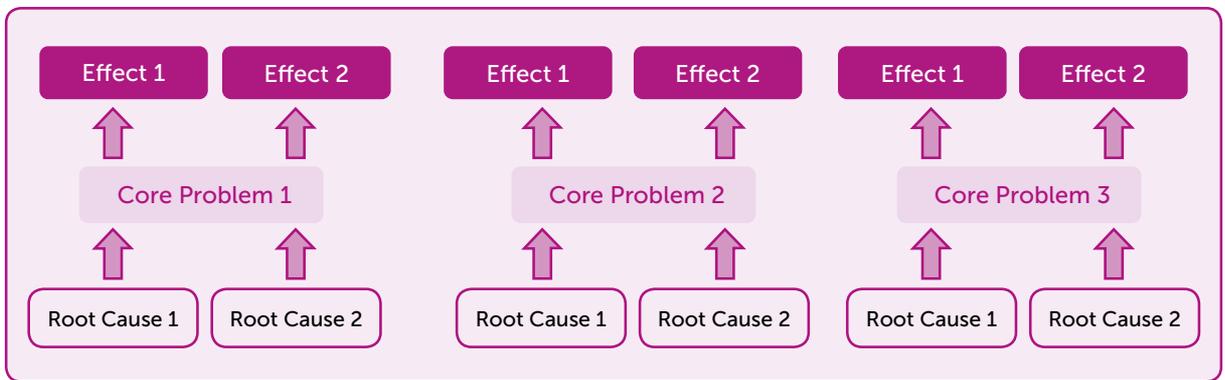
responsible for research planning, team management and overall coordination so that the research process can work smoothly and effectively. The facilitator is a person who interviews respondents and facilitates the discussion/consultation and the note keeper is someone who records the answers of all participants and assists the facilitator in cases of external interruption or any need for clarification.

Step 2: Select Research Topic

Selecting a topic is the first step in the process, and thus is vitally important. Selecting a research topic begins with the following points:

- **Brainstorming Issues:** Brainstorm as many issues as you can and then pay immediate attention to reflect on each issue identified from personal or organizational perspectives with a view to prioritize and select the best ones for your study.

Bottleneck Issues: After issue brainstorming, researchers must narrow them down through problem tree analysis as this can help researchers in defining and selecting topics effectively in their current context based on root causes and effects. In order to get effects and root causes, researchers must questions “Why has this problem occurred and what are the root causes? What is the result or consequence of this problem?” so please have a look at a problem tree analysis in the box below:



- **Select Topic:** Identify the most important, the most beneficial or the least difficult issue to handle, as well as, depend on your budget and timeframe. These are prioritized for action research. Identify the effects that are most troubling to people, it may be that you are interested to understand exclusion better and therefore you might select

the issue especially to vulnerable children or students who attend your school or institution. During the topic selection, researchers must pay high attention to the root causes and effects of the core problem which you consider is the most critical and impacts your school or institution.

Stage II: Planning

Step 1: Develop Term of Reference (ToR)

Terms of reference (ToR) is the research plan which includes the research background, the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, methods and techniques. It also details the scope and sample as well as the timeframe. Look at the information below.

- **Context Background:** This section sets out the background to the research with local factors influencing education (demographics, geography,

infrastructure, gender disparity, discrimination status, local economic conditions, poverty rate; local language barriers...etc.).

- **Problem Statement:** It is a concise description of an issue to be addressed or a condition to be improved. It should detail the exact issue and aims to answer to the issue or research objective. In short, it must be clear, concise, realistic, and relevant to the context.
- **Objective:** It is a statement describing what the research is going to discover and find answers to the research topic. There can be more than one objective but too many can make the research too complicated.
- **Research Question:** This is the central question asked to find out the information to meet your research objective.



■ **Methodology:** Researchers must think critically before deciding on the methodology because this will affect to research result at the end.

▲ **Action Research Methods:** Action research can benefit from varied approaches to disciplined inquiry that includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thus, researchers must think carefully about which method should be used in order to gain reliable data. There are 2 core methods used in undertaking research and they have different definitions as described below:

➤ **Qualitative Research** relies on detailed verbal descriptions of phenomena, opinions, perceptions, attitudes and consequences. It does not require numbers or percentage of data but it aims to describe why and how the issue happens and predict possible future trends. The number of questions, sample size and number of respondents are usually small so that the researchers can analyze the data/information effectively and efficiently.

➤ **Quantitative Research** relies on statistical data that aims to explain how many times an issue happens so research must be shown in numbers or percentages. It is then usually presented in a diagram or a graph. This research is considered by researchers to be easy to analyze and explain about phenomena or consequences.

▲ **Data Collection Techniques** refers to the way in which data is collected. Choosing the right technique can influence your results. Researchers can choose a single technique or mix techniques. There are 4 main types of data collection techniques including:

➤ **Questionnaire:** This is a stand-alone instrument of data collection where all the questions are administered and sometimes even the answers are structured. They are printed and can be sent by mail, or online

or conducted orally by phone. They have long been one of the most popular data collection techniques. They are especially used for collecting quantitative data where the sample is large.

➤ **Interview:** Conducting interviews can help you to build a deeper understanding of the thinking behind the respondents' answers. Interviews are a favorite technique in qualitative research.

➤ **Focus Group Discussion:** This takes the interactive benefits of an interview to the next level by bringing a carefully chosen group together for a moderated discussion on the subject of the survey. Once again these are mainly used in qualitative research.

➤ **Observation:** Making direct observations can be a good way of collecting simple information about orderly tasks such as checking the number of manual interventions required in a day to keep an assembly line functioning smoothly. Observation is frequently used in classroom research into the effectiveness of different teaching techniques.

■ **Scope and Sample Size:** These depend on the type of your research but keeping your research scope and sample small is strongly recommended.

■ **Timeframe:** Please remember action research is just a study for the researchers to evaluate researchers' own actions so stay small and make it short. Based on experience, action research can last 2 weeks to 3 months as a maximum.

Step 2: Prepare Budget and Work Plan

The tables below show how budgets and work plans are organized in case your research need a budget to support it. If your research doesn't require any expense; it is unnecessary to use the following table. For example, individual or collaborative research in your own location normally costs nothing except time.

Budget Plan Format

Activity	Description	Unit	#Unit	#District	#Day/Night	Cost	Total	Justification
1	Data Collection							
	Per diem	Person						
	Accommodation	Person						
	Transportation	Person						
	Refreshment	Person						
	Logistic/Materials	Pc						
	Grand Total							

Activities Plan Format

No	Activities	School Name/ Venue Name	Province/ District	Target Groups	# Days	Started Date
1	Research Planning Meeting					
2	Data Collection					
3	Data Analysis					
4	Report Writing					
5	Dissemination Workshop					

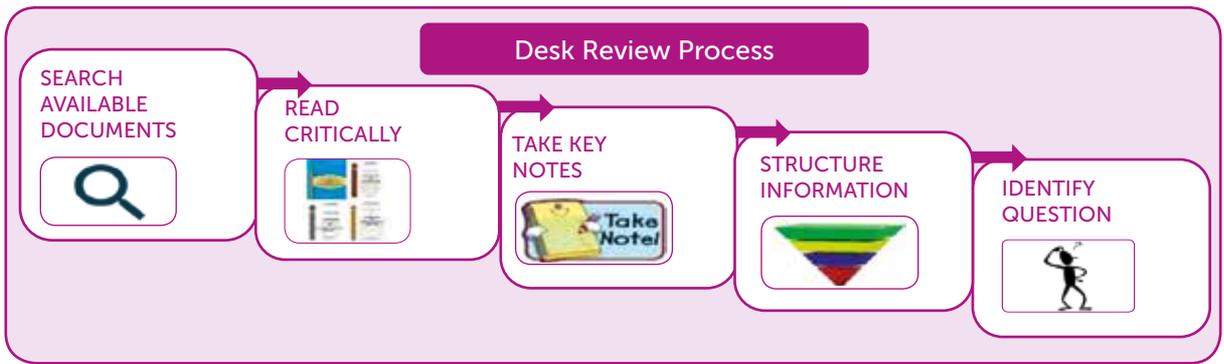
Step 3: Conduct Desk Review and Design Questionnaires

■ **Conduct Desk Review.** This lets you see what came before, and what did and did not work for other researchers. It is primarily done in order to:

- ☞ To see what has and has not been investigated.
- ☞ To identify data sources that other researchers have used.
- ☞ To learn how others have defined and measured key concepts.
- ☞ To develop alternative research projects.

- ☞ To put your work in perspective.
- ☞ To provide evidence that may be used to support your own findings.

Various documents including policy documents, such as ESP, AOP, EMIS or any available reports are used during a desk review and they are very useful to inform the current investigation. The diagram below shows you how to conduct a desk review to capture essential information to inform your upcoming research and assist you and questionnaire design.



You can organize the review in many ways; for example, you can center the review historically (how the topic has been dealt with over time). Good desk review writing starts with a broader overview of issues surrounding the topic and then funnels down to more specific issues that are closely related to the research question.

■ **Design Questionnaires:** A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Although questionnaires are often designed for statistical analysis of the responses, this is not always the case. There are 2 main types of questions:

☞ **Open-ended questions** are called guided questions without structured answers and usually used in **qualitative research**. Open-ended questions are ones that require more than one-word answer which may come in the form of a list, a few sentences, a paragraph

or a speech. These kinds of questions give respondents freedom to give whatever answers they want. The number of questions in this kind of questionnaires must consist of 5 -15 as maximum.

☞ **Closed-ended questions** are used for collecting data within a limited frame of options and they are the foundation of all statistical analysis applied in **quantitative research**. All questions are designed with structured answers and respondents are limited in giving their answers but it is very popular for new researchers because it is easy to analyze in Excel or SPSS. However, constructing the questions and the range of choices for answers requires special skill. 15 -25 questions are often fine in quantitative questionnaires.

The box below shows the differences between open-ended and closed-ended questions as example:

Open-Ended Questions for Qualitative Research	Closed-Ended Questions for Quantitative Research
1. What subjects do you like the most? Why?	1. What subject do you like the most? a) Mathematic <input type="checkbox"/> b) Chemistry <input type="checkbox"/> c) Biology <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Why do you like this subject? a) I like calculation <input type="checkbox"/> b) Easy to study <input type="checkbox"/> c) It is fun <input type="checkbox"/>

Stage III: Implementation

Step 1: Data collection

Action research can include all types of data gathering methods and approaches such as qualitative and quantitative, including interviews and surveys, are commonly used. The research plan (ToR) is important because it details the research methods & techniques, scope and kinds of respondents; thus, data collection must proceed based on its statement. Generally, data collection is conducted after questionnaires have been completely designed. According to real practice, qualitative research requires more attention than quantitative research due to its kind of questions and techniques. Quantitative research is

very simple in gathering data, either by sending out a written questionnaire with structured answers, or by using it for one-to-one interviews so it requires only the interviewer and respondent. In contrast, key informant interviews (one-to-one interviews) and focus group discussions (FGD) are frequently used in data collection for qualitative research so it must require more resources such as a number of interviewers, at least 2 persons (facilitator and note taker) with coordination and arrangement skills. The pictures below will instruct you how one-to-one interviews and focus groups discussions are arranged in an appropriate way:

Interviewers and respondents sit opposite each other so they can have face to face interaction. This enables the interviewer/facilitator to observe the respondent at the same time, or for the note taker to take key notes which can be used as a verified source



in data triangulation. The advice is to make it simple and informal as much as possible so the respondent feels comfortable and free to give answers.

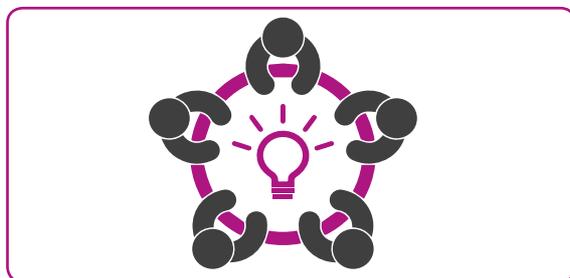
Interviewers should arrange participants in a circle wherever the discussion takes place. FGD is a powerful approach to gather reliable data from respondents along with eye contact, and face-to-face interaction,

and a variety of ideas or concepts from each actor in the discussion. Additionally, interviewers are able to notice passive participants and then encourage them to be active members. FGD requires 2 persons so one facilitates and other one records all answers or speech from the respondents. 4 – 6 participants are the standard size for FGD.

One-to-One Interview



Focus Group Discussion (FGD)



Step 2: Data Analysis

Data analysis is very critical in the action research cycle. It is defined as a process of categorizing, transforming and interpreting data into useful information for decision-making in a professional pathway or project implementation. Data analysis starts with data encoding. Data encoding is a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas. There are several types of data analysis based on technology and

innovation; however, action research should select the simplest methods in order to fit the capacity of new education researchers based on the current local context. These are 2 simple tools for data analysis: Matrix Table and Data Entry Form.

Matrix Table is a form used to conclude and analyze answers from qualitative research and usually designed in MS. Word or MS. Excel in order to advantage researchers to interpret data and then transcribe it into the report.

Please look at sample matrix table below:

Questions	Teachers	School Directors	Key Finding
Who are the main actors in developing the school AOP?	I think education staff from POE, DOE, school director, school accountant. To be honest, I am never invited by school directors to do it.	Based on my practice, only school director, deputy school director, and school accountant work together to produce school AOP because teachers are always busy with teaching.	Based on answers from teachers and school directors, only few actors such as school directors, school accountant, and POE and DOE staff involve in development of school AOP; in contrast, teachers are never invited, as well as, there is no participation from community or students.

Data Entry Form is a form designed and used for quantitative data analysis to produce numerical or statistical results for transcribing into the research report. It aims to explain phenomena, perceptions, attitudes and consequences. In order to create data entry form, please read instruction below:

First of all, create a worksheet in Excel and name the first sheet "Data Entry Form". In this sheet, create columns based on questionnaires (number of questions). The first column is participants (number of respondents) and the following column has the questions.

Second, create another worksheet named Coding Sheet which is a list of answers based on all answers to each question in a research questionnaire. Use this to code all answers from respondents.

To code the answers, please select rows under question

- click Data
- Data Validation
- List
- Source
- select Coding Sheet
- click Ok.

Then code all answers in Data Entry Form by selecting a word from the menu box. The box at the right side is the result from coding.

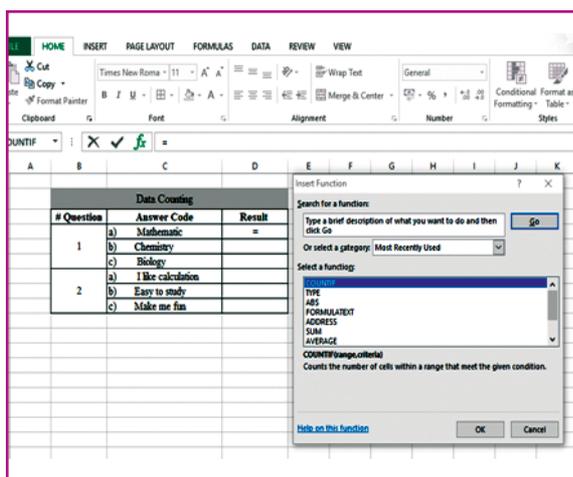
In order to count data, here is the instruction:

- Create Data Counting sheet
- select each row under Result
- put = insert function (fx)
- select COUNTIF
- in Range box select Data Entry Form then put comma (,) then select coding sheet (select a word or code you want to count)
- click Ok.

#Participants	Q1	Q2
	What subject do you like the most?	Wh do you like this subject?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

#Question	Answer Code
1	a) Mathematic
	b) Chemistry
	c) Biology
2	a) I like calculation
	b) Easy to study
	c) Make me fun

Data Entry Form		
#Participants	Q1	Q2
	What subject do you like the most?	Why do you like this subject?
1	a) Mathematic	a) I like calculation
2	a) Mathematic	b) Easy to study
3	b) Chemistry	c) Make me fun
4	c) Biology	b) Easy to study
5	a) Mathematic	a) I like calculation



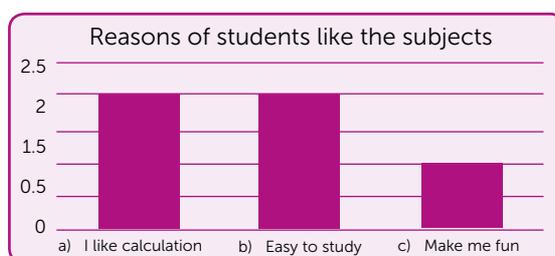
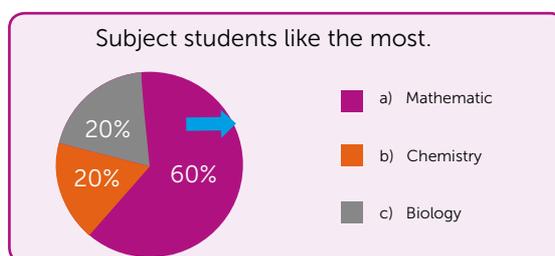
Data Counting		
Question	Answer Code	Result
1	a) Mathematic	3
	b) Chemistry	1
	c) Biology	1
2	a) I like calculation	2
	b) Easy to study	2
	c) Make me fun	1

Making the chart is the last process in data analysis for quantitative research and then bring this to report writing for explanation and description.

- Select Answer Code and Result in Data Counting Sheet by each question
- Right click
- Select Quick Data Analysis
- Choose charts that you like
- Click Ok.

You can move your chart to a new sheet named as Research Result Diagram by right clicking on chart

- Move chart
- click Object in
- choose name in the box (Research Result Diagram)



Step 3: Report Writing

Report writing is a critical step in the study process. It is a description of research work done and it involves several steps in presenting the key findings/research results in a form of essay or thesis. The below is a suggested report template:

- **Abbreviations/Acronyms:** Is the list of shortened form of words or phrases; for example, CDP is shortened form of the words "Capacity Development Partnership".

- **Executive Summary:** This summarizes your report and it is usually written after other points of the report are totally completed. In other words it is often the last thing you write.

- **Introduction:** This should be written with a comprehensive idea related to the research topic and it can include history, geography, demography, issues of social exclusion and gender. It often consists of one page.

- **Problem Statement:** This is a concise description

of the issue which the research aims to address or a condition to be improved. It should detail the exact problem that the research aims to find out. In short, it must be clear, concise, realistic, and relevant to the context.

- **Research Objective:** This is an extract from term of reference (ToR).
- **Research Question:** This is a question used in the study to answer to your research objective.
- **Research Method:** Another extract from term of reference (ToR).
- **Scope and Sample:** This is another extract from term of reference (ToR).
- **Key Findings:** This section is the heart of the report because it has to detail the findings and synthesizes the information into a description of the results based on your analysis of the data. It often comprises 2 or 3 pages.

- **Challenges:** This should include a brief account of the challenges or difficulties which the research team faced during undertaking research from the beginning until the end.
- **Lesson Learnt:** What do you learn from your research process? List them in this section.
- **Conclusion:** Conclude and summarize the problem statement, objectives, and methodology and key findings in this conclusion in a few paragraph or sentences but avoid making it as bullet points.
- **Recommendation:** These should be feasible, SMART and adaptable or maybe include suggestions for further study based on the findings in order to address the issues.
- **Annex:** Attach your term of reference (ToR) and questionnaires or other references used in your research.



Step 4: Dissemination Workshop

The dissemination workshop aims to embed key findings into the education planning for better improvement in the future particularly in the area of study. It should be conducted after the final AR report has been produced; therefore, the research team has adequate time to prepare an appropriate agenda

and the logistics required to ensure the workshop proceeds smoothly and effectively. This workshop targets only key people such as education actors involved in the development of education planning and leadership management. The agenda below is an example so researchers can contextualize based on their own context.

Topic	Time needed
Participants arrive and register	15 minutes
Welcome participants and present the main objective of the workshop	10 minutes
Research team present about result of Action Research (AR): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem Statement • Study Objective • Methodology • Scope and Samples • Key findings • Challenges • Lesson learnt • Conclusion • Recommendations 	120 minutes
Coffee Break	15 minutes
Questions and Answers	10 minutes
Divide the big group into smaller groups for discussion on selecting prioritized key findings and recommendations for embedding into ESPs & AOPs at school, district and provincial level.	1 hour
Closing remarks	10 minutes



Stage IV: Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation is a process by which the researchers take the time to contemplated and assess the efficacy of the research and activities implemented after embedding key findings into their planning. This means they evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the research study and reflect on how to improve it when they undertake the next one in the future, as well as, the impact from key findings or integrating them into education action planning. Simultaneously, research-oriented leaders have a vision that guides their work, collect and analyze data to better inform their decisions. Research-oriented leaders are engaged in ongoing self-study in which they assess the needs of their schools, identify problem areas, and develop strategies for becoming more effective and then they can repeat action research process.

Having a good plan helps us to envision clearly how to achieve the goal but good monitoring and evaluation help us to learn more about what went well and not well then these inform implementers or decision-makers to fix out the weakness and create new ideas or initiatives to produce better result.

Monitoring is a process to gather data or information in order to check progress of action implementation. For example, one activity in S-AOP stated that 50 poor students are awarded as scholars and each receives school materials (5 pens, 10 handbooks and a bag) once a year with at least 50% female so monitoring process must track 50 poor students with girls counted in order to know how many or percentage of girls are reached to achieve the indicator and this is called **Evaluation**. In summary, monitoring and evaluation is to track number and measure the result based on indicators in planning.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

In conclusion, action research is a process of analyzing one's own actions and sharing findings with community, duty bearers, policy- and strategy-makers; as well as, relevant stakeholders in order to seek consultation for improvement and development. This can be done in many ways such as in daily work, in formal and non-formal meetings or in workshops.

Quick tips in action research process:

Here is some advice about what to do when undertaking your action research:

- **Stay small:** The study itself should focus on one aspect of the overall picture so that it is always clear what you are investigating. Don't try to investigate everything at once and target clear area you really interest to discover.
- **Plan carefully:** This means having a broad outline of where you hope the research will lead you, but it does not mean setting specific objectives.
- **Organize team appropriately:** This means researchers must structure team with clear roles and responsibilities and gender balance is strongly recommended because if no good team arrangement, the research process is not able to proceed smoothly with effective result.
- **Set realistic timeframe:** The specific project you are working on is short term and bounded so set out time appropriately.
- **Focus on learning:** It can be tempting to focus only on activity and produce a report that offers descriptions of the activity, what you did it. But try to focus on what you learn from the process and what will change as the result.

Annex I : Sample Report Format

Cover Page

(ACTION RESEARCH)

RESEARCH TOPIC:

RESEARCH TOPIC

Name of Province/District

Group Members:

- | | |
|-----------|----------------|
| 1/ | Position |
| 2/ | Position |
| 3/ | Position |
| 4/ | Position |
| 5/ | Position |
| 6/ | Position |
| 7/ | Position |
| 8/ | Position |
| 9/ | Position |
| 10/ | Position |

Year 20... – 20.....

Abbreviations / Acronyms

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iii. Problem Statement	4
iv. Research Objective.....	5
v. Research Question.....	5
vi. Research Method.....	5
vii. Scope and Sample	6
viii. Key Findings..	7
ix. Challenges....	8
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i. Executive Summary
ii. Introduction
iii. Problem Statement
iv. Research Objective
v. Research Question
vi. Research Method
vii. Scope & Samples
viii. Key Findings
ix. Challenges
x. Lesson Learnt
xi. Conclusion
xii. Recommendation
Annex I: Term of Reference
Annex II: Questionnaires

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- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242456051_Action_Research_A_Guide_for_the_Teacher_Researcher
- <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jpr/vol1/iss1/3/>
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