

Empowerment for sustainability

Empowering women in rural communities in Georgia using participatory action research

Mervi Ukkonen

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Supervisors: Molly McGregor, LUCSUS, Lund University

Anne Jerneck, LUCSUS, Lund University

Abstract:

The underlying problem investigated in the thesis is marginalization of rural women in a developing country context. Purpose of the research project was to investigate if participatory action research method could trigger and enable development of organizational-level processes in women's action groups in villages in Georgia that according to Speer and Hughey's (1995) theory could lead to empowerment of the action groups. Two women's groups were formed in two villages during the Georgian participatory action research that consisted of a community mobilization workshop organized by the researcher and community action taken by the women's groups. Qualitative data of the thesis includes semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the women's groups, community action plans drafted in the workshops and observations made during the participatory action research process that lasted six weeks. Results of the research confirm that participatory action research method can encourage rural women to organize into action groups and thus enable them to take action to benefit their community. All the three organizational-level processes that included development of numerous roles in the group, enhancing inter-organizational relations with other societal actors and sustaining organizational activity through strong relationships between group's members had started to emerge in the women's groups of the Georgian participatory action research. The organizational-level processes were theorized by Speer and Hughey (1995) to lead to empowerment of the action groups and therefore there is reason to believe that members of the research might become empowered in the long run if they continue to take action in their village as members of the established groups.

Keywords: participatory action research, community organization, organizational-level empowerment, organizing cycle, Georgia, women

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List of abbreviations

PAR - participatory action research

APA - appreciative planning and action

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1 Introduction

1.1 Setting the context

Georgia is a former Soviet country in transition from a Soviet-style planned economy to a market economy bordering Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Armenia.



Figure 1. Map of Georgia (Wikimedia commons, 2012). Field study was conducted in villages around the city of Zugdidi located right by the administrative boundary line to Abkhazia.

A relatively high economic growth rate and a standard of living were achieved in the Caucasus region in the 1970s and 80s thanks to the comparatively productive agricultural sector enabled by favorable and diverse climate and fertile soils (Beruchashvili et al., 2002). This was brought to an end by independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing civil war that broke out when two autonomous regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, saw their opportunity for independence (Beruchashvili et al., 2002). After the Rose revolution of 2003 and the subsequent change of regime, the Georgian government has implemented a substantial number of reforms aimed at deregulating the economy, scaling down corruption, establishing a foundation for free trade and improving administration in order to create competitive market conditions for foreign direct investments

(OECD, 2011). High average rate of economic growth of 9.7 percent was reached between 2004 and 2008 but it was halted by the global economic crisis and the August war against Russia in 2008 (OECD, 2011). This armed conflict triggered another stream of 26 000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in addition to the 300 000 people displaced in the internal conflicts of early 1990s (OECD, 2011). Due to geographic proximity to the administrative boundary line (approximately 30 km) that divides Georgia from the disputed territory of Abkhazia many IDPs settled in Samegrelo region (Gassmann et al., 2013) where I conducted the field study. The extraordinary economic growth before 2008 resulted in a substantial increase in tax collection that was in part invested in social benefits of marginalized groups (OECD, 2011). However, this effort has not succeeded in bringing relief to the most financially vulnerable people because very little finances were allocated to agricultural sector (Welton et al., 2008). Agriculture is the most important sector of economy from the human development perspective (Welton et al., 2008). In 2005 the World bank estimated that a third of the population was living with less than two dollars a day while 54.5 percent struggled under the national poverty line of 112.9 GEL¹ (Georgian lari) a month in 2003 (OECD, 2011). Almost one fifth of Georgians had emigrated in 2005 since the 1989 census (OECD, 2011). This paper will explore if a method called participatory action research can empower women in rural Georgia.

1.2 Women's situation in rural Georgia

The socio-economic situation is more troublesome in the countryside than in urban areas. More than half of Georgians live in the countryside and are employed in agriculture, the majority in low-intensity self-sufficiency farming (OECD, 2011; Welton et al., 2008). Only one third of the economically active population are contractually employed while the rest are self-employed on household farms, in small businesses or work without receiving salary (OECD, 2011). Women are gradually taking on more jobs outside agriculture although employment opportunities are scarce (OECD, 2011). Women face difficulties in reaching managerial positions both in public and private sectors and are generally paid lower wages (OECD, 2011). A presidential decree from 2003 established targets for ensuring gender equality in the labor market and wages and an equal access to the political domain and all levels of management (OECD, 2011). There is no apparent disparity in the education system (OECD, 2011). Admission is equal between sexes and girls stay longer in the system (OECD, 2011). Households often cultivate fruits, vegetables and cereals on small plots, which generate low monthly wages compared to other sectors of rural economy (OECD, 2011). The low wages are largely responsible for the high rate of poverty and poor standard of living in the countryside, which are recovering sluggishly (OECD, 2011). Rural standards of living have been deteriorating since gaining independence and restoration of large-scale agriculture would require

¹ 46.61 Euros as converted on 25.4.2014 at http://coinmill.com/EUR_GEL.html

machinery, fertilizers and affordable credit (OECD, 2011). However, the agricultural sector has been largely underfunded as it was granted a mere 1.5 percent of the country's budget in 2009 (OECD, 2011). Georgian women in rural areas thus live in difficult socio-economic conditions. Due to scarce employment opportunities, poverty and lack of trust for politicians and institutions women have limited means to improve their living conditions.

1.3 Thesis rationale

I chose to narrow down research to investigating women because during my previous stays in Georgia I had developed a strong feeling that they were ready to take action in local communities if only the process was triggered somehow. During an internship in 2009 at a local women's organization in Zugdidi I had observed that women would take on low-status, poorly paid jobs at the market to ensure monetary household income in addition to taking full responsibility for household chores and raising children. I wanted to give these able Georgian women an instrument that could potentially help them take matters into their own hands and control over the future of their communities. I was also curious to see what the women could accomplish if their individual efforts were united into a group effort. I chose to use a participatory action research method to facilitate community organizing in rural communities in Samegrelo region in Georgia, and simultaneously investigate the organizing process through the lens of empowerment theory. PAR method has empowered women in countries like Pakistan and China (Aziz et al., 2011; Xiaoxian, 2010). The thesis thus aims to study if participatory action research could be used to launch and facilitate community organizing and action and induce empowerment on an organizational level in action groups that emerged from an action-oriented workshop. Due to lack of research on empowering mechanisms of participatory action research method I analyzed the qualitative data using a theory from the field of community psychology developed by Speer and Hughey (1995). According to Speer and Hughey's community empowerment theory a community organization that follows a four-phase organizing cycle (assessment, research, action and reflection) and is grounded on certain rules known as organizing principles can develop processes on multiple levels. Through three processes including development of inter-organizational relationships, roles within the group and sustaining action the organization itself and even the surrounding community can be empowered. In order to understand the empowering mechanisms of PAR I will thus investigate if the action groups (referred from now on as women's groups) of the Georgian PAR followed the organizing cycle and if the three organizational-level processes had developed in them.

Due to unexpected results of the pilot study and the subsequent remake of the research design I was forced to adapt the PAR to a serious time constraint. The research thus consisted of two parallel

processes: (1) research designed to produce data for the thesis conducted by me and (2) the Georgian PAR carried out in collaboration with two women’s groups formed by female participants of a community development workshop. Only data of the former research project is investigated in the thesis.

1.4 The research question and sub questions

In order to explore the relationship between community organizing and empowerment the main research question was:

Can participatory action research empower Georgian women in rural communities?

Sub-questions of the research, method for data collection and analysis are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Sub question, method for data collection and analysis.

Sub-questions	Method for collecting data	Method of analysis
To what extent did the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR follow the empowering organizing cycle developed by Speer and Hughey (1995)?	Literature review, interviews, community action plans, observations	Community empowerment theory
Had organizational-level processes that indicate empowerment emerged in the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR?	Literature review, interviews, community action plans, observations	Community empowerment theory
How does literature on participatory action research complement the community empowerment theory?	Literature review	Literature on participatory action research

2 Theory

In this section I will describe the participatory action research (PAR) method that has been found empowering to its practitioners. Research that could explain how the PAR method has succeeded in empowering its practitioners is inadequate and was therefore chosen as the topic of this thesis. In order to unravel the mystery I have applied a theory from the field of community psychology developed by Speer and Hughey (1995) that I have named community empowerment theory that will be introduced in the following section. Theorizing on the empowering mechanisms of the PAR method and the community empowerment theory will also be compared.

2.1 Relevance to sustainability science

The Georgian participatory action research is based on a key concept within sustainability science: co-creation of knowledge with local stakeholders who were of varying ages, educational backgrounds and professions but shared ethnicity (Georgian) and religion (members of the Eastern Orthodox Church). Co-creating knowledge was a way to link scientific findings from the field of community psychology with local participants' indigenous knowledge and adapt solutions to the local context and thus avoid using universal solutions known as panaceas (Ostrom, 2007). The Georgian participatory action research fulfills characteristics of transdisciplinarity as described by Lang et al. (2012). The research question of this thesis was designed to investigate a participatory solution to a societal issue of women's marginalization that is one of the millennium development goals and globally recognized as a major obstacle for human development. The research was based on mutual learning between a researcher, local participants and a local facilitator, who had substantial work experience from local civil society. The thesis contains also reflection of a researcher's role as a PAR practitioner and an agent of social change as a researcher (me) and the local facilitator played a small but necessary role in mobilizing women to take community action in the targeted villages. This type of knowledge production belongs mode two that is argued to be better adapted and thus more useful for solving complex sustainability challenges (Gibbons, 1994).

2.2 Ontological and epistemological considerations

Ontological standpoint of this thesis is social constructionism (Bryman, 2008) because participatory action researchers would consider people's social reality as socially constructed. PAR draws from phenomenology, ethnography and case-study methods focusing on the subjective experience of oppressed members of society (Khan and Chovanec, 2010).

2.3 What is participatory action research?

Participatory action research is a political process designed to empower, liberate and transform its practitioners (Brydon-Miller, 2001 as cited in Khan and Chovanec, 2010). PAR practitioners view poverty as "the systematic outcome of the oppression of many by wealthy and powerful domestic and international elites" (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3: p.6), which is in line with PAR's neo-Marxist world view emphasizing class conflict and commodization of labor. PAR is also linked to radical feminism (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3). PAR practitioners believe that distribution of money and power must be changed fundamentally in order to eradicate poverty and oppression (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3).

A local intervention usually begins with a critical analysis of distribution of wealth, power, economic and cultural factors and exposure to risk conducted by an external researcher, which is then used in local people's analysis of their situation and writing an action plan (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, part 3). PAR is carried out as a joint project between academia and marginalized people who are trained in scientific inquiry and methods (Khan and Chovanec, 2010). Local people take part in identifying a topic for the joint research project, gathering and analyzing data and theorizing in order to validate their practices (McTaggart, 1991). PAR approach to local knowledge credits the poor and oppressed with having the intelligence and analytical capabilities (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3). Co-creation of knowledge is designed to democratize scientific practice and produce richer and more accurate knowledge of the local context (Khan and Chovanec, 2010). Social change is achieved when PAR practitioners collaboratively transform their current ways of working, for instance in social organizations (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005).

PAR methodology often involves a cyclic process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, then re-planning and so forth, through which practices and the social world can be changed (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). All the information on the four phases is fetched from Kemmis and McTaggart's *The Action Research Reader* (1988) where the cycle was described for the first time.

Planning: The plan should be flexible and adaptable, critically informed, aware of the risks involved in social change as well as of political and material constraints of the situation. The critically informed plan helps practitioners overcome constraints, recognize new areas where to apply PAR and empower them to act more wisely and effectively in the future. During planning participants also construct a language that is used for analyzing and learning more about the situation (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

Action: Carrying out action plans takes the shape of a social and political struggle for improvement of current practices. Implementing action plans is a way to change practices in a careful, critically-informed and thus bound by prior practice, thoughtful and controlled way while maintaining flexibility and the ability to make instant adjustments when necessary. Action in Participatory action research must provide evidence for critical evaluation of activities, which serves as a basis for refinement of the action. Practitioners must therefore plan the action in the way that it will provide data for evaluation. Action provides also an opportunity for developing further action, which might be incorporated into the next cycle after careful evaluation. Critically informed action is thus based on lessons learned from the previous cycles (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

Observation: Observation in the context of PAR refers to documenting the effects of critically informed action, which provides a basis for critical self-reflection. Data is collected on the action process, its intended and unintended effects, the specific context, constraints and how the two impact action. A carefully implemented collection of observational data can contribute to improvement of practice through more profound understanding and more critically informed strategic action. Since some constraints are unknown in advance observation produces valuable data for later cycles. Categories and measurements are designed in advance but they should be responsive for documentation of unexpected findings (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

Reflection: Reflection is intended to describe and evaluate the processes, challenges, limitations and effects of the strategic action in order to revise the action plan. The purpose of describing is to deepen understanding of the related aspects, in particular of prospects of future action taken in the group and as individual members of the group. Part of the reflection is often carried out in form of a discussion among participants (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

2.4 How is PAR empowering?

The only bit of information on empowering mechanisms of the participatory action research method I found during an extensive literature search is that authentic change and empowerment that drives it and derives from it is achieved by applying the four-step spiral to change practices and situations (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). This statement does not provide any information on the empowering mechanisms needed for the analytical purpose of this thesis. I have thus no choice but to conclude that there is currently no research available on the empowering mechanisms of the PAR cycle although several practitioners have found the cycle empowering. To get to the bottom of the intriguing empowering effect of the PAR spiral I therefore applied a theory from the field of community psychology developed by Speer and Hughey (1995), which I named community empowerment theory.

2.5 Introduction to community empowerment theory

In order to examine a process that is theorized to lead to empowerment of women's groups of the Georgian PAR and their members I used a theory that I have named community empowerment theory developed by Speer and Hughey (1995). Speer and Hughey (1995) studied a network of community organizations, called the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (PICO), located in twenty-five cities across the United States. Empowerment was found to arise from a four-phase cycle of assessment, research, action and reflection, referred to as an organizing cycle, and three principles which were employed by all the studied community organizations (Speer and Hughey, 1995). I chose to use Speer and Hughey's (1995) theory because the activities carried out by the community

organizations in the PICO network during an organizing cycle are similar to those of the PAR cycle as demonstrated in table 2. In addition to, both cycles include an element of knowledge production, although co-created with a researcher in PAR, and using the lessons learned to refine strategies for action. An additional study by Speer et al. (1995) was partially used for analysis because it contained a more profound analysis of the organizing cycle. Speer et al. (1995) conducted a comparative study on two community organizations in a large North-American city in order to determine which phases and tasks an organizing cycle consisted of.

The women’s groups that emerged from the Georgian PAR workshops can be classified as community organizations and therefore provide a suitable setting for conducting a multi-level analysis of empowerment. According to the classification presented in Speer et al. (1995), the two women’s groups can be labeled as community organizations with both issues and geography as their member base because women from one village formed a group around common individual problems.

The different settings in which the women’s groups and the community organizations of PICO network operate raises a concern for applicability of the theory: Speer and Hughey (1995) developed their theory by studying a network of community organizations founded twenty years earlier in an urban setting in the U.S. while the women’s groups were formed during the PAR workshops in order to take action in a rural area in a lower middle income country Georgia, according to the World Bank’s definition of a lower middle income country² (The World Bank, 2014a). Instruments of social power might not be applicable, or might have to be heavily adapted, in the Georgian context where citizens have low trust for institutions (Roberts and Pollock, 2011). The theory might be less suitable for analyzing organizational outcomes but similarity of the cycles suggests that the theory might prove useful for analyzing the process, which is the goal of this thesis.

Table 2. Comparison of activities in Speer and Hughey’s organizing cycle and the participatory action research cycle

Speer and Hughey’s organizing cycle	PAR cycle
Assessment: identifying a critical issue	Planning: identifying a critical issue, making a plan for action Observation: documenting the process

² The World Bank classifies countries into four income groups: low income, lower middle income, upper middle income and high income countries. Lower middle income countries had gross national income (GNI) per capita between US\$1,026 and US\$4,036 in 2011. The World Bank classifies all low- and middle-income countries as developing (The World Bank, 2014b).

Speer and Hughey's organizing cycle	PAR cycle
Research: consulting people, organizations and institutions; identifying targets for action	-
Action: developing a strategy for action, action entails gathering many stakeholders to change allocation of community resources and exercise of power	Action: entails changing practices, producing data for critical evaluation Observation: documenting the process and impact of action
Reflection: analyzing the impact of action, making future strategies, discussing how participants experienced the process	Reflection: describing and evaluating the process, the impact and limitations; improving the action plan

2.6 What is empowerment?

Goal of this thesis is to investigate if PAR can enable development of processes in a women's group that are necessary for the participants and the community organizations to become empowered in the long run. Empowerment can be broadly defined as "the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations" (Israel et al., 1994, p.152). The concept of empowerment was first developed in community psychology in 1981 (Rappaport, 1981) but has been found useful in number of other disciplines such as social work (Itzhaky, 2003), public health (Koelen and Lindstrom, 2005; Minkler, 2004) and community practice (Holden et al., 2005). Community psychologists identified community organizations as important venues for generating empowerment in individual members, the organization itself and the community in which the organization operates (Rappaport, 1981). Community organizations thus provide an appropriate setting for conducting a multi-level analysis (individual, organizational and community levels) on empowerment, which is needed to give attention to environmental and contextual issues instead of blaming the individual for their outcomes (Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004). A multi-level analysis on all the three levels is beyond the scope of this thesis due to a time constraint. Focus of the research is narrowed down to organizational level because it "is the most critical for community organizations" (Speer and Hughey, 1995, p.737).

2.7 Conceptualizing empowerment

In Speer and Hughey's (1995) community empowerment theory, empowerment is conceptualized as "the ability of community organizations to reward or punish community targets, control what gets talked about in public debate, and shape how residents and public officials think about their

community” (Speer and Hughey, 1995, p.732) which is based on Gaventa’s (1980 as cited in Speer & Hughey, 1995) well-established theory about three instruments of social power. Speer and Hughey (1995) theorize that individual organization members can not reward or punish community targets, shape debates, or impact ideologies but these are results of a collective action taken by an organization (as a group effort) and therefore conceptualized as organizational level outcomes. A community organization is empowered when its members are able to influence allocation of community resources and power according to their values and preferences using the instruments of social power (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Such capacities take undoubtedly longer than six weeks to develop and therefore no empowerment could be expected to emerge within the time frame of the Georgian PAR. The thesis is therefore narrowed down to investigating if any organizational-level processes that according to community empowerment theory can lead to empowerment had emerged in women’s groups of the Georgian PAR. According to the community empowerment theory, organizational-level outcomes (empowerment) can be reached through organizational-level processes (Speer and Hughey, 1995). These empowering processes evolve when a community organization applies a four-phase organizing cycle for taking action in the community which is another empowering aspect of Speer and Hughey’s (1995) community empowerment theory. A third empowering dimension of the community empowerment theory is three principles called organizing principles that a community organization wishing to empower its participants must fulfill³ (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Analysis of the organizing principles is beyond the scope of this thesis due to word limitations. In order to investigate if participatory action research method can empower female participants of the Georgian PAR I will only investigate if the organizational-level processes had started to emerge in the women’s groups and if the groups followed an organizing cycle similar to that described in the community empowerment theory.

2.8 Process of empowerment according to community empowerment theory

According to Speer and Hughey’s (1995) community empowerment theory, three organizational-level outcomes (empowerment) of rewarding or punishing community targets, shaping topics for debate and community ideology are put into action through three processes of (1) developing participatory niches (roles), (2) sustaining actions and (3) establishing relationships with other organizations. Processes occur during various phases of the organizing cycle: assessment, research, action and reflection, except for the latter (Speer and Hughey, 1995). None of the organizational-

³ According to the community empowerment theory, the three organizing principles become manifested throughout the organizing cycle and form a basis for empowerment (Speer and Hughey, 1995). The organizing principles sum up the empowering process: “(1) empowerment is achieved only through organization, (2) organization is built on the strength of relationships among its members, and (3) relationships are developed as individuals act together and reflect on that action” (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

level processes take place during reflection that is an individual-level process (Speer and Hughey, 1995). In this section I will describe the three processes through which organizational-level empowerment is created. All the information on the three organizational-level processes in the following three paragraphs is fetched from Speer and Hughey's (1995) study.

One way that community organizations in Speer and Hughey's (1995) study attracted many people to join their organization was by creating and rotating participatory niches. Community organizations developed niches "with the clear intention of promoting participation and increasing skills among all members" before the process of solving a new community issue was started. A member of an organization who had previously not been actively involved could thus easily take on a niche (role) (s)he felt comfortable with, learn the skills required for the task, hopefully appreciate the newly acquired skills and take on another niche when another community issue was tackled. Niches were also rotated in the organization in order for members to "stretch their capacities" (p.743). Besides attracting new members niches also helped to sustain participation by providing a setting where members could learn new skills. There were no elected positions for members such as president, secretary, or treasurer. Vincent and Tricket (1983 as cited in Speer and Hughey, 1995, p.743) assert that "specification of a finite number of available niches that elections typically entail limits development of individuals by locking them into a few, relatively permanent positions, thus stagnating individual development as well as limiting an organization's responsiveness to its local context" (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

Another way to sustain participation in organizational activities was to enhance relationships among organization's members. PICO network's strategy to facilitate relationship building among its members was to apply a particular assessment method for identifying a critical issue: 50-100 face-to-face conversations were conducted primarily with members of the community organization but also with a few non-members. During the conversations people got a chance to "listen for areas of mutual self-interest, discuss how issues affect them and their community and challenge each other to act on these issues" (p.736) and to get to know each other in the process (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

The third process through which organizational-level outcomes (empowerment) are developed according to the community empowerment theory is establishing relationships with community agencies. Relationships with community agencies are necessary for gaining an access to information about the prevailing allocation of community resources and how agencies exercise power around an issue. Information gathering is conducted during research phase of the organizing cycle. Relationships with community agencies are needed also for influencing public debate and shaping

shared consciousness because community agencies put community’s values and ideologies directly into action through their job as community service providers. Interacting with public officials from community agencies is an opportunity for community organizations to influence the shared consciousness. During action a community organization receives confirmation on which communal agencies wish to cooperate on solving the critical issue. Collaborating to solve local problems is an opportunity to solidify the newly established relationship between a community organization and communal agency. A precondition for relationship building is sustained and stable organizational participation which many community organizations fail to do (Speer and Hughey, 1995). In order to investigate if PAR can empower Georgian women in rural communities in this thesis I will investigate if the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR have created and rotated niches, established inter-organizational relationships and sustained organizational activities.

Table 3. Conceptualization of empowerment on individual, organizational and community levels of analysis (Speer and Hughey, 1995)

	PROCESS	OUTCOME
INDIVIDUAL	Organizational membership Relationship building Action/reflection	Knowledge of power Emotional correctness Organizational participation
ORGANIZATIONAL	Participatory niches Inter-organizational relationships Organizational actions	Reward and punishment Define topics and extent of debate Shaping community ideologies
COMMUNITY	Multi-sector development Institutional linkages Target community issues	Multiple empowered organizations Cross-sector collaborative efforts

3 Methodology

The research started off with a different topic but due to unexpected findings of the pilot study I converted the research into participatory action research. Due to the sudden remake of the research design I did not have the time to gather data using participatory action research and instead the research consisted of two parallel processes: (1) research designed to produce data for the thesis conducted by me and (2) the Georgian PAR carried out in collaboration with two women’s groups. The two research projects had their own distinct research questions. The research question of this thesis is: How can participatory action research empower Georgian women in rural communities? while the two research questions of the Georgian PAR are: (1) what is the most appropriate way to take action in the specific context of your rural community to ensure maximum impact? and (2) how

have you personally developed throughout the process. In this thesis I will focus on analyzing data from the former research project. In this section I will describe the development of the research design because it had implications on the results.

3.1 A pilot study

Initially I wanted to study how a participatory community development tool called Appreciative planning and action (APA)⁴ could be used to empower rural women in Samegrelo region in Georgia. However, the local workshop participants did not respond to instructions given by the facilitator (me) as in the empirical studies conducted in Africa and Asia (Odell, 2011a; Odell, 2011b) and I switched over to participatory action research. The three Appreciative planning and action (APA) workshop thus became a pilot study for the actual research. Local participants were reluctant to share their success stories of collaboration for the village which was a key feature of APA and a necessary step for drafting a community action plan (Odell, 2011a; Odell, 2011b). Developer of the APA method Malcolm Odell, whom I had email contact with, advised me to revise questions designed to spark the discussion, let the local participants take charge of knowledge production and reduce my interaction to simply introducing activities of the APA workshop. All these efforts proved futile: I failed to spark the crucial group reflection of past successes and the local participants did not commit to taking action in their village in any of the three workshops of the pilot study. I saw no other option but to take on a more active role as a researcher and redesign the project into a more collaborative participatory action research in order to mobilize women. Other lessons learned from the pilot study were that the only selection criterion for participation had to be personal motivation for taking community action, not their Russian skills⁵, and female participants who fulfilled the criteria had to be selected by a local contact person.

3.2 Participant recruitment and sampling

The local contact persons succeeded in gathering motivated female villagers for nine PAR workshops and thus they became one of the key factors for implementing the participatory action research. I made contact with a few potential contact persons through acquaintances and recruited more using the snowball sampling technique (Bryman, 2008). Each workshop was attended by five to fourteen

⁴ The APA method has been successfully applied in a women's empowerment program in Nepal which promoted empowerment through literacy, village banking and micro-enterprises for 125 000 rural women by a U.S. based NGO called Pact (Odell).

⁵ I facilitated the three workshops in Russian to have control over the situation instead of having to rely on interpretation from English to Georgian. However, finding Russian-speaking women who were enthusiastic to take action turned out to be impossible.

women (with an average of nine participants in each) and they were conducted in eight villages located in Samegrelo region. A total of 79 women took part in the nine participatory action research workshops. The contact persons knew villagers personally and were therefore better equipped to invite active female villagers to a workshop. The contact persons were instructed to inform potential participants that participation was voluntary and could be interrupted at any time, workshops were part of a research project, the Finnish university student was not an aid worker and therefore could not provide any funds to community development projects possibly arising from the workshop or help in establishing contact with foreign donors and some participants would be called to an interview after the workshop. I tried to be very clear on the point that I would *only* lead the workshop together with a local facilitator and conduct interviews afterwards in order to avoid any unrealistic expectations that can be formed on a foreign student entering a rural community in Georgia.

3.3 Collaboration with a local interpreter

I decided to lead the nine PAR workshops in Russian⁶ and let a local non-governmental organization worker interpret my instructions to Georgian as well as participants' input from Georgian to English. Contribution of the local facilitator-interpreter was another key factor to successful implementation of the PAR because she could communicate my instructions in a way that made sense to local participants. She also took part in facilitation of the workshops by answering participants' numerous questions, helped me make contact with some contact persons and interpreted the semi-structured interviews. The local facilitator emphasized in the beginning of each PAR workshop that she had no access to community project funding from the local organization she worked for.

3.4 Research design

I revised the workshop design according to findings from the pilot study and organized a PAR workshop nine times for nine groups using the improved workshop outline. By repeating the procedure so many times I wanted to ensure that at least some of the nine groups would form an action group after the workshop by themselves without further facilitator support. Workshop participants from two villages formed a group after the workshop (referred to as Shori and Akhlo in the thesis) and started to implement their newly drafted community action plans. My goal was to test if PAR could be used to launch the kind of community organizations that could empower their members. Results of a literature search revealed that numerous factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, class and social backgrounds influence an individual's empowerment experience (Foster-

⁶ A vast majority of participants of my PAR had studied Russian as a second language and understood it although lack of practice made many of them reluctant to speak it.

Fishman et al., 1998). Since research on factors affecting individual and organizational empowerment was incomplete it would have been challenging to study why two of the nine groups took action and the other seven did not. Instead this thesis aims to explain the processes that took place in the two women's groups of the Georgian PAR that did take community action. In order to increase the chance that at least some PAR workshop participants would be characterized factors that make a fertile ground for the seeds of community action to sprout I held the PAR workshops nine times.

Some of the activities that formed the PAR cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection occurred while Akhlo and Shori groups were implementing their action plans after the workshop. In order to investigate the empowering processes that take place during the full PAR cycle only members of Shori and Akhlo groups were therefore interviewed. Besides producing data for the thesis, interviews also provided space for these participants to self-reflect on the process that is an important source of knowledge in participatory action research. Interviews were conducted approximately six weeks after the workshops with nine members from the two groups who had participated in all the phases of PAR cycle consisting of a workshop, interview and activities organized by the group members themselves without any facilitator support.

I decided to continue to use the appreciative planning and action workshop design for PAR, although complemented with interaction with local participants, because APA is a self-help method that relies heavily on local participants' indigenous knowledge (Odell, 2011a). Appreciative planning and action projects implemented in Nepal have proven that this development tool 1) is a self-help method that relies on participants to take control and responsibility over planning and finding necessary resources and requires almost no funds or material besides pens and paper 2) is designed to induce participants to self-organize after a two-three-hour workshop 3) is easy to use, and 4) generates real enthusiasm, self-confidence and commitment (Odell, 2011a). A standard appreciative planning and action workshop consists of seven steps and starts with an appreciative inquiry during which participants share their own success stories of prior community engagement (Odell, 2011a). Appreciative inquiry is an increasingly popular organizational change method that tries to bring out the best qualities of groups and organizations with carefully composed questions and provoke members of those groups to change their organization through the inquiry (Bushe and Kassam, 2008). A conscious and intentional orientation to the strengths of the group distinguishes the Georgian PAR from Speer and Hughey's (1995) study on a network of congregations and their community empowerment theory that is based on findings from their case study. The network employed a conventional non-appreciative research methodology by examining the prevailing, in many cases difficult, situation, formulating solutions and then implementing change. The interview

data indicates clearly that the appreciative approach did not play a substantial role in encouraging the local participants to take community action or affect the participatory action research process in any significant way and is therefore not specifically analyzed in the thesis.



Figure 2. Participants of a PAR workshop drafting an action plan

Steps after the appreciative inquiry follow a standard workshop design used to guide strategic organizational development process and consists of creating a dream or a vision for an organization, planning how to realize that dream and finally drafting an action plan with concrete tasks that is illustrated in figure 2. These steps are followed by Do it now! when workshop participants carry out a small task on the spot in ten minutes to experience the power of collective action (Odell, 2011a), which is illustrated in figure 3. I decided to leave out the last activity called Drum and dance when participants express their hopefully positive experiences of the workshop through sing and dance (Odell, 2011a) because it did not seem appropriate in the Georgian context. I followed guidelines compiled by Chapagai (2000), one of the developers of appreciative planning and action, in designing the activities. Before each workshop I described the workshop design, purpose of my research and that results would be published on a university web site but participants would remain anonymous.



Figure 3. Participants of a PAR workshop decided to clean the yard surrounding the municipality building as the Do it now! task which was designed to taste the power of collective action.

3.5 To what extent did the women's groups of the Georgian PAR fulfill the characteristics of PAR?

The Georgian PAR suffered from certain limitations that were caused by the unexpected results of the pilot study and the consequent remake of the research design. Members of the women's groups were not involved in designing research questions of the Georgian PAR nor did they take part in gathering or analyzing data, which are key features of PAR (Khan and Chovanec, 2010). An important data analysis tool is observing that is also one component of Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) PAR spiral that was not implemented by the local participants of the Georgian PAR (but by the researcher) due to a time constraint. The other three phases of the PAR spiral (planning, action, reflection) were carried out in the Georgian PAR, which will be discussed in a later section of the thesis.

The local facilitator-interpretor and me had collaborated during my field study conducted in rural Samegrelo in 2010 to collect data a Bachelor thesis in Environmental Economics that investigated subsistence farmers' economic incentives for soil conservation. This field study served as a pre-study for the thesis at hand as it helped to form an understanding of rural women's socio-economic situation in Samegrelo region. During the so-called pre-study I learned that rural women were well aware of different forms of oppression they were subject to which made them unable to take action.

In order to overcome the paralysis created by the awareness of the grim realities of the prevailing situation and power inequalities in the country I decided to skip analysis of the local conditions with the local female participants which is commonly included in PAR practice. Results of the preliminary analysis conducted through my previous thesis project were fed into the community action plans through my and the local facilitator's practical advice given during the PAR workshop. A critical analysis of distribution of power and allocation of resources with the local participants was thus intentionally left out. However, the local facilitator and me had only a general view of conditions in Samegrelo region and therefore the local female workshops participants were in charge of drafting action plans. The local facilitator and me tried to stimulate the process with advice and critical questions. The Georgian PAR was thus dependent on the knowledge, analyses and efforts of the local female participants according to principles of participatory action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3).

3.6 Interviews

Approximately six weeks after the PAR workshop, between the 12th and 19th of August 2013, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with members of Shori and Akhlo groups. I interviewed all members of the two groups who had participated in all activities of the full PAR cycle with the exception of two women who were out of town for several weeks and could not be reached for an interview. Interview questions were asked in English and interpreted to Georgian by the local facilitator. All interviews were tape-recorded. Names of the respondents, the two villages (Akhlo and Shori) and a town (Patara Kalaki) have been changed in the thesis to ensure anonymity. Respondents from Akhlo women's group have pseudonyms starting with a letter m (Medea, Malichava, Miranda, Monika, Maia, Magda) while respondents from Shori group were renamed with names starting with a letter t (Tamara, Tea, Tamta). Photos found in the thesis were taken in the seven PAR workshops that did not result to formation of an action group and thus do not depict respondents.

3.7 Qualitative data analysis

The interview guide included quite a few open questions that enabled unexpected categories of data to appear. The study by Speer and Hughey (1995) that was used for analysis was not conducted using participatory action research methodology and therefore I strived for additional flexibility in the interview guide, which proved useful. Data analysis started by organizing the interview data according to the questions addressed. The interview data was coded and similar codes were clustered together in order for repetitive patterns of action and consistencies to be identified and categories to emerge. Through the process of coding, categorization and analytic reflection themes

were formulated (Saldaña, 2009). Themes that came out of the interviews coincided with the categories presented in studies by Speer et al. (1995) and Speer and Hughey (1995) with a few exceptions. I am aware that “all coding is a judgment call” since we bring “our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, [and] our quirks” to the process” (Sipe and Ghiso, 2004, as cited in Saldaña, 2009, p.7) and I took measures to address the problem. Since I coded alone I talked to a fellow student about my coding and the following analysis, which in my opinion helped me find better connections between categories (Burant et al., 2007). Some of the more apparent categories were easy to recognize already when completing field notes directly after the interviews. Several categories reemerged in the following interviews so I check my interpretation of the categories with the respondents (Ezzy, 2002, as cited in Saldaña, 2009). I also kept a reflective journal in order to keep track of the analytical process (Ezzy, 2002, as cited in Saldaña, 2009). Observations were made during interviews and workshops on issues such as decision-making within the group and recorded in field notes. Community action plans drafted in the workshops is an additional source of data.

3.8 Limitations of research

It would have been useful to do coding with another person to discuss the coding process, resolve coding disagreements and discuss emergent findings. Had I not been under a serious time constraint I would also have invited the local participants to take part in coding and categorizing all data in order to establish an ownership of data which is an important step in participatory action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3). This would also have provided an additional means of checking the data. Timing of the interviews was not the best possible. Hazelnut is the primary source of income for smallholders in Samegrelo region and August, the time of the interviews, is also the harvesting season for hazelnut. It was time-consuming and difficult to arrange interview times with women who spent fourteen hours a day collecting nut in their nut plantations. I was not aware of the nut season when I designed the research schedule. Since I had to change the scope of the research unexpectedly from investigating appreciative planning and action to a participatory action research, the local participants were not included in defining a research question, which imposed certain limitations.

3.9 Introduction of the two rural communities

In this section I will provide background information of the two women’s groups that took community action as a result of participating in the workshop and the villages the groups originated from.

Akhlo: A village called Akhlo is located right by the administrative boundary line that separates the autonomous republic of Abkhazia from Georgia and is a neighboring municipality to Zugdidi, the regional center of Samegrelo region. In the thesis I will refer to the village with a Georgian word Akhlo which means near to emphasize the geographical vicinity to Zugdidi. Thanks to the geographic proximity to Zugdidi and the boundary line the village has received more state assistance than the more remote villages, for instance for reconstruction of the main road and the village school (Miranda). The village inhabits approximately 5500 people. One respondent estimated that forty percent of villagers have jobs other than farming the household plot as drivers, teachers and saleswomen at the market in Zugdidi (Monika) thanks to proximity to Zugdidi. Subsistence farmers receive most of their income from growing hazelnut that is complemented by vegetables, bay laurel milk and corn. Nine women participated in the Georgian PAR workshop and thereafter formed an action group that will be referred to as a women's group in the thesis. Five members of the group work in the village health center as nurses and laboratory assistants. The remaining members (Maka, Maia, Malichava, Marina, Manana) are internally displaced people (IDP) from Abkhazia who all, except one, live in a dilapidated collective center close to the health center. IDPs are recognized as one of the most vulnerable group of people in Georgia (Gassman et al., 2013). The contact person, who belonged the health center staff, invited women residing in the collective center to the PAR workshop because they had collaborated before (Monika). The IDP women helped the health center personnel for instance in finding villagers for medical examinations that were provided only for certain groups of people (Magda). Five of the six respondents of the Akhlo group had university degrees while the sixth member had only taken courses at a college without graduating. Ages ranged between 17 and 63.

Shori: Shori is located approximately 45 km from Zugdidi and rather isolated due to poor public transportation and is appropriately referred to with a Georgian word Shori that means far away. The village administration had little or no funds to administer and funding for municipal services came from the budget of a district center located approximately twenty km away and referred to as Patara Kalaki (meaning a small town in Georgian) in the thesis. Busses do not run all the way to the village and the closest bus stop is on the main road approximately 15 km away. The village was described as dormant due to lack of jobs, public transportation or any recreational opportunities provided by restaurants or a cinema (Tamta) like in the Soviet times (Tamara). There is no sewage or running water in the houses because they have not been rehabilitated in rural Samegrelo since Georgia gained independence (Tamta) and the main road leading to the village lacked pavement (observation). The municipality building and the village health center were run-down, only a few rooms in both buildings had been renovated and were somewhat fit for use. The village had not

received any state assistance but two international non-governmental organizations had implemented development projects that provided training in project management, a common corn mill for villagers and renovation of the village kindergarten (Tea). There were 2500 inhabitants in the village. Eight women participated in the workshop, six of which took an active part in the subsequent group activities and new women joined the group. One of the three respondents from Shori group had a university education while the other two were high school graduates and had taken care of children and household after getting married at a young age. They all took part in running their family farms that occupied a few hectares at the most and produced grapes, corn and corn. The respondents were 36, 43 and 62 years of age.

4 Results and analysis

In this section I will analyze to what extent the two women's groups of the Georgian PAR followed Speer and Hughey's (1995) organizing cycle that has been found empowering. The purpose of such analysis is to determine to what extent one of the empowering features of Speer and Hughey's community empowerment theory are fulfilled by the Georgian PAR. Description of the organizing cycle was fetched from the study by Speer et al. (1995) because it provided a sufficiently detailed account.

4.1 The cycle of organizing

In this section I will try to answer one of the sub-questions of this thesis: To what extent did the women's groups of the Georgian PAR follow the organizing cycle developed by Speer and Hughey? I will compare activities of the two women's groups implemented during a full organizing cycle with those of two community organizations in Speer et al.'s (1995) study to see to what extent the activities included in the organizing cycles match. If activities of the organizing cycles are similar the Georgian PAR might have the potential to empower its Georgian female practitioners.

The term *organizing cycle* is used to refer to the Speer and Hughey's (1995) cycle that consists of assessment, research, action and reflection phases. Activities included in the Georgian PAR consisted of a PAR workshop organized by me for each group, five weekly group meetings organized by women themselves, community action taken by the two groups and interviews conducted by me that also served as reflection.

4.1.1 Assessment

Assessment in Speer and Hughey's (1995) organizing cycle entailed sharing stories, opinions and solutions to local problems among members of the community organization and to a lesser extent with non-members in 50-100 face-to-face conversations held during two to six months. Conversations aimed at identifying a critical issue that was then chosen as the community organization's target of action (Speer et al., 1995). Another purpose of assessment was to provide an opportunity for members of the organization to interact and build relationships among themselves and with members of the community (Speer et al., 1995).

Findings: The women's groups of the Georgian PAR carried out assessment in 15-20 minutes during a PAR workshop. Both groups chose renovation of the village health center as the critical issue. Renovation of the village health center was a logical target for community action because there were only a few public buildings such as a school and a municipality administration in the villages. In Akhlo group half of the members worked in the village health center and might have perceived PAR as an opportunity to refurbish their work place. A member of Shori group motivated the group's decision as follows:

"You can't really think about other things if you have problems with your health. Renovating the health center is really important so that the village doctor will want to stay and work here and not get a job somewhere else. She already works in Patara kalaki during the weekends. She needs better working conditions. Our doctor is very attentive and competent and follows up on her patients after the visit. It was easy to get support for the project from the villagers." (Tamara).

Both health centers were in a desperate need of renovation. The village health center in Shori consisted of two simple rooms with the most rudimentary medical supplies and furniture (observation). The building had been badly damaged by a fire the past year (see figure 4) and only the two examination rooms had been rehabilitated by repainting the surfaces. The health center had no electricity, sewage system or running water and thus no indoor toilet. The health center in Akhlo was in a slightly better condition thanks to renovation of surfaces to parts of the building and equipment acquired with funds received from an international non-governmental organization a few years back. However, also this health center lacked a sewage system, running water and an indoor toilet (observations).



Figure 4. Photo on the left shows a non-renovated part of the building in which the health center of Akhlo was located. The clinic was situated on the second floor. Photo on the right depicts a part of the health center in Shori that was damaged in the fire. The women's groups as critical issues chose renovation of the two health centers.

Comparison: The assessment processes carried out by community organizations in Speer et al. (1995) and the two women's groups of the Georgian PAR were quite different. The women's groups carried out assessment in only 15-20 minutes during a PAR workshop while the community organizations in Speer and Hughey's (1995) study gathered information from other members in 50-100 face-to-face conversations. Building relationships was an important function of community organizations' assessment through face-to-face conversations in Speer and Hughey's (1995) study but negligible in women's groups of the Georgian PAR due to lack of time. Community organizations in Speer and Hughey's study (1995) had hundreds of members and face-to-face conversations were an appropriate method for establishing contact with many members and involving them in the process of community action. Assessment processes of Speer et al.'s (1995) community organizations and women's groups were similar in the way that a critical issue affecting a community was successfully identified. Community organizations in Speer et al. (1995) recognized problem areas such as crime, drugs, physical infrastructure, deterioration of neighborhoods and violence for which specific critical issues then were identified.

4.1.2 Research

Research in Speer and Hughey's (1995) organizing cycle was designed to reveal causes of the critical issue. People, organizations and institutions with knowledge of local problems were identified and then inquired in order to understand (1) how allocation of community resources contributed to the

issue and (2) how public offices exercised power around the issue (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Through assessment and research community organizations thus revealed a contradiction between one or several public offices' values and practices such as funding priorities (Speer and Hughey, 1995). When dealing with crime community resources might for instance have been granted to enhancing law enforcement instead of prevention activities (Speer et al., 1995). These public offices became a target for the community organization's action that aimed at achieving a more favorable allocation of community resources and power (Speer et al., 1995).

Findings: Due to the appreciative approach of the Georgian PAR causes of community problems were intentionally not discussed. This is the main difference between the Georgian PAR and the organizing cycle employed by the community organizations in Speer et al.'s study (1995).

4.1.3 Action

Action in Speer and Hughey's (1995) organizing cycle consisted of developing an action strategy that aimed at reallocating the community resources and implementing the plan. The term "action" was used for a collective attempt to exercise power often by gathering a large number of members of community, media, public officials and other organizations concerned with an issue. The goal was to bring public pressure on an issue, which would hopefully lead to modification of the community's targets and a more favorable allocation of resources (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

Findings: Both women's groups drafted a community action plan consisting of tasks considered necessary by members of the groups for the village health center to get renovated. The community action plans of the two women's groups had a lot of similarities because the two groups chose the same critical issue: renovation of the village health center. Planning action continued in the five meetings that both groups held after the workshop to discuss details about implementation of the community project (Tamta) as well as new ideas from the ten-year vision. The groups discussed and decided how to talk to the chairperson of the village council (Miranda), how to write up the community action plan to make it presentable for the chairperson (Miranda, Tamta), delegated tasks among group members (e.g. who would collect signatures and buy material) (Magda, Tamara), shared experiences (Tamta) and rewrote the action plans (Tamta). Both groups carried out several activities recorded in their community action plan and the Shori group took additional effort that had not been included in the plan.

The action planned and recorded in a community action plan by Shori group included asking the town council of Patara kalaki, non-governmental organizations and Ministry of Health for funds and equipment necessary for renovation of the village health center. The Shori group took a collective

responsibility for coordinating the project, acquiring necessary funds and equipment and recruiting voluntary workers among fellow villagers to help with the renovation. During the six weeks that followed writing the community action plan Shori group presented their plan to the chairperson of the town council of Patara kalaki municipality and asked for funds and equipment for the village health center as stated in the action plan. Additional activities that were not mentioned in the original action plan but the Shori group perceived necessary included collecting two hundred signatures from their fellow villagers and asking a local business man for a donation. The petition was presented to the chairperson of the town council to demonstrate villagers’ vast support for the women’s group’s initiative. The chairperson of the town council promised to fix an entire sewage system that would provide running water for the health center. The local businessman promised to donate 500 Georgian lari⁷ for installing electricity.

Table 4: Community action plan of the women’s group in Shori.

Tasks	How to carry out the task?	Time frame
Installing running water	Ask funds from Patara Kalaki town council, non-governmental organizations, the Ministry of health	6 months for the whole project
Installing electricity		
Renovating indoors		
Acquiring medical equipment		
Acquiring a stove for heating the clinic in the winter		

Activities planned by the Akhlo group included asking the chairperson of the town council, the state, non-governmental organizations, the city council of Zugdidi and the Ministry of Health for funds for renovation of the health center as well as raising money from fellow villagers. Community action taken by Akhlo group was asking the chairperson of the town council for equipment and funds for renovation of the village health center for which the group had received a positive response. The chairperson promised to provide a motor that would pump running water indoors to the second floor of the building where the clinic was situated.

⁷ 206.40 Euros as converted on 25.4.2014 at http://coinmill.com/EUR_GEL.html

Table 5: Community action plan of the women’s group in Akhlo.

Tasks	How to carry out the task?	Time frame
Renovate the existing health center indoors (i.e. clean and redo the walls) as well as outdoors	Ask the local town council, the state, NGOs, Zugdidi municipality and the Ministry of health for funds and material. Collect money from villagers.	6-12 months for the whole project
Acquire an ambulance		
Build an indoor toilet		
Acquire furniture, e.g. for a waiting room		
Install running water (a motor is needed) and sewage		
Acquire medical equipment		
Acquire gas for heating		
Get internet		

Comparison: The action taken by community organizations in Speer et al.’s (1995) study and the women’s groups in the Georgian PAR differed to a great extent. The former put pressure on politicians through public meetings and demonstrations attended by 100-1000 members of community where the current allocation of community funds contributing to the problem was exposed. Women’s groups of the Georgian PAR on the contrary asked for funding directly from the chairpersons of town councils and a local business man with the sole support of the group. The reason for such different approaches was that the two community organizations in Speer et al. (1995) were pressure groups that according to the definition aim to build social power on a grass-root level and use it to redirect power in a community in order to negotiate improvements for their members. The women’s groups of the Georgian PAR did not use the pressure group method but approached the local politicians with power over community resources directly. Also Shori group considered it necessary to demonstrate their fellow villagers’ support for the initiative by collecting two hundred signatures. The two town council chairpersons’ commitments to fulfill the two women’s groups’ requests suggests that the groups of the Georgian PAR chose an appropriate method for the local context.

For the community organizations in Speer and Hughey’s (1995) study public meetings were a direct demonstration of organizational power because the meetings were designed to punish the prevailing

community targets and persuade those with power over community resources to reallocate resources. Women's groups of the Georgian PAR had a similar intention. The local women of both women's groups met the town councils, and planned also to approach state actors, to impact allocation of community resources. Since community resources in rural Georgian municipalities were scarce Akhlo group also planned to increase the total amount of resources available for community development by asking non-governmental organizations and private persons for funds. Shori group had already tried this approach and succeeded.

4.1.4 Reflection

Reflection in Speer and Hughey's (1995) organizing cycle was intended to give an opportunity for the participants to ponder upon the group's actions and analyze the overall impact, make future strategies, discuss how participants experienced the process and how their understanding of social power might have changed. A community organization provides a setting for processing these feelings and for putting new insights about social power directly into action (Speer and Hughey, 1995). After comparing the reflection processes I will present output of reflection sessions in order to discuss the overall impact of PAR on the local practitioners. This analysis was intended to give the reader an understanding of how respondents' realization of social power through community action had developed during six weeks that the Georgian PAR had been on-going.

Findings: Reflection was conducted in two ways in the Georgian PAR. Both women's groups reported having evaluated their actions and revised their action plans according to results of the groups' discussions without using an agenda in the five weekly meetings held by both groups. Another round of reflection was held in form of a semi-structured interview session attended by the researcher-interviewer, the local interpreter and a member of a woman's group. The questions were designed and asked by the researcher and an interview guide was followed.

Comparison: Reflection processes carried out by the community organizations in Speer et al.'s (1995) study and the women's groups of the Georgian PAR were similar in the sense that a fixed plan was often used and they were held after each action. All participants who had carried out the action in Speer et al.'s (1995) study met right after each action to evaluate the action and examine how they had developed through the project for which a fixed plan was used.

Realization of social power through community action

Findings: Several respondents from both groups said the most important contribution of the PAR project was the insight that they can develop local conditions according to their own priorities if they

organize and collaborate, instead of passively waiting for a government intervention (Malichava, Magda, Medea, Miranda, Monika). These respondents had realized that they could influence the development of their community⁸. Two respondents from Akhlo group reported having experienced the power of group effort when they received a positive response to their funding request from chairperson of the town council (Magda, Miranda). Another important realization reported by respondents from Akhlo group was that it was the group members' responsibility to take action if they wanted to see a positive change in their village (Malichava). According to two respondents, the researcher and the local facilitator played a crucial role in making them aware of their ability and responsibility to take action (Medea, Malichava).

One respondent from Shori group was able to reflect on how the Georgian PAR had made her understand the strength of group effort. She had previously asked non-governmental organizations in Zugdidi to help out in implementing community projects. Participatory action research had made her realize that her individual efforts had failed because she lacked group support for bringing ideas to life (Tea). In a weekly group meeting she had got an idea of asking a wealthy local business man for funding renovation of the health center which the business man agreed to (Tea).

According to my and the local facilitator's observations, members of the Shori group had an extraordinary strong realization of social power during the workshop (observations). Several workshop participants became anxious when they understood during the workshop that the researcher was not able to grant any funds for implementing their community projects. The moment when the workshop participants realized that they would have to do all the work by themselves, and most importantly, that they were capable of that was almost tangible. After the realization the group of twelve women started to enthusiastically draft an action plan. The local facilitator and I were stunned. Not surprisingly, the team in Shori had made the most impressive progress with implementation of their action plan during the six weeks before the interviews. Also in the other group one respondent reported a profound personal realization:

"My perception of the future has changed. I understood that I have to do everything by myself. I'm going to write an action plan for myself to help me get a Master's degree, which is expensive. It costs 3000 lari. I also plan to go to Tbilisi to find a clinic for doing an internship. I was cautious before but the workshop motivated me." (Monika).

⁸ One respondent explained Georgians' perception of an individual's responsibility for taking community action: "Parents do very much for their children and young people have become used to receiving things without having to work for it. They are dependent of their parents and it's not good. I, for example, work now but my salary is very low and I depend on my parents' help. Young people expect their parents to help." (Monika). There is a way to reverse the trend that contributes to passive young people, in her opinion: "Parents should give their children the right to work, take private lessons and sport classes so that they will get used to the freedom. The new generation will be more active because they have the opportunity to work." (Monika).

Researcher: How exactly did the workshop motivate you?

“It (the workshop) gave me self-confidence as I was timid before. Usually in Georgia men solve problems while village women are passive but the workshop made me understand that women can also do a lot. This will be an example for other women too.” (Monika).

4.2 Organizational-level processes

In this section I will investigate if the three organizational-level processes (participatory niches, inter-organizational relationships and sustaining action) had started to emerge in the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR. In the previous section I have investigated to what extent the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR have followed the four-phase organizing cycle developed by Speer and Hughey (1995). Going through the four phases of the organizing cycle was theorized as empowering to members of the community organization, the organization itself and the community that the organization operates in (Speer and Hughey, 1995). While going through the four phases members of the community organizations developed organizational level processes as a group: participatory niches, sustaining activity and inter-organizational relationships (Speer and Hughey, 1995). In this section I will investigate if any organizational-level processes had developed in the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR during the first organizing cycle.

4.2.1 Inter-organizational relationships

Findings: There were few organizational entities in the two villages of the Georgian PAR. In Shori, the village administration had been entrusted to a so-called head of a village and his assistant although there were practically no funds to administer. The women’s group turned to the chairperson of a town council of a district center Patara kalaki to ask for funding for their community project. The only organizational entities in Shori besides the minimal village administration were a school, a kindergarten and the health center. Personnel from the school and kindergarten had joined the women’s group after the PAR workshop but were not interviewed because they had been unable to attend the PAR workshop. Organizational entities in Akhlo included a town council with some funds of their own, a health center and a school. No non-governmental organizations had their headquarters in Shori and Akhlo but occasionally international NGOs based in Zugdidi, the regional capital of Samegrelo region, had short-term aid projects in selected villages. Respondents from Akhlo group reported that they had had contact with state health actors earlier as well as with the town council of Zugdidi (Medea, Magda). Approaching community agencies with power over community resources was the primary instrument that both women’s groups employed for reaching their goal. Respondents from both women’s groups reported that relationships with chairpersons of the town councils were crucial for a positive outcome: members of Akhlo group said that a good relationship

with the chairperson of the town council made them confident that they would receive the necessary funds for the project (Medea). Akhlo group planned to resume the past contact with a NGO in Zugdidi that had helped them in the past (Maia).

Members of the women's groups of the Georgian PAR considered the success of the project to depend on their relationship to the chairperson of the town council and the local businessman in Shori's case. If these people failed to deliver the necessary resources respondents reported they would find NGOs. Thus also both groups' back up plan dependent on organizational entities. In the Georgian PAR creating and enhancing interdependent relationships with other organizations could be said to be the primary instrument of achieving goals for the women's groups.

Comparison: PICO often joined forces with other congregations and other organizational entities in order to create power necessary for moving community-level issues, and women's groups did the same. The difference is that congregation of the PICO network used a pressure-group method so the primary goal was to mobilize masses while the women's groups relied pretty much on inter-organizational relationships.

4.2.2 Participatory niches

Community organizations identified multiple different roles or niches that were arranged in a horizontal fashion and filled as the organization moved through the phases of the organizing cycle (Speer and Hughey, 1995). "Examples of roles included conducting one-on-one conversations with congregation and community members, asking questions of public and private officials during meetings, arranging media coverage for the organization and its agenda, researching public records, contributing information to public records, leading public events, mobilizing organization members to attend an event, time-keeping for events, arranging venues for events, telephoning organization members, and arranging transportation... In this way the range of habitats within an organization was expanded, thus creating a larger pool of participants." (Speer and Hughey, 1995, p.743). There was also a leader in each community organization but his/her tasks were not specified. Niches were rotated among members of the community organization.

Findings: There were not so many distinct niches in the two women's groups of the Georgian PAR. The few niches that did exist developed spontaneously and were filled immediately after having emerged as the two women's groups advanced through the organizing cycle. In both groups niches were delegated to members of the women's group according to their interests, skills and previous experience of similar tasks: "Everyone has different skills and characters so they complete each other, for example one has good handwriting, another is good at presenting, some are a little bit

rude and others very polite. We know who is good for each task.” (Monika). Niches included being a leader of the women’s group, collecting signatures (only Shori group), typing and printing out a community action plan, asking chairpersons of a town council for funding and asking a local business man for a donation. Leaders in the two women’s groups were responsible for reminding other group members of the meetings by phone (Malichava, Miranda, Tamta, Tamara, Tea), leading a discussion at the weekly meetings (Medea) and taking care of practical things like arranging transportation for a meeting with chairperson of the town council.

Respondents reported having acquired some new skills during the Georgian PAR some of which can be traced to the specific niches. A few respondents from both groups reported having learned how to communicate with and influence representatives of a village (or town) council (Tea, Medea, Malichava). However, in the Georgian PAR most of the activities of assessment and action phases of the organizing cycle were conducted as a group effort and not assigned as niches to individual group members. Respondents from both groups reported having learned many skills through those activities including: communication skills (Tamta), working in a team (Tea, Medea, Malichava, Maia, Magda), writing a community action plan, identifying useful resources and a critical issue (Malichava, Medea, Miranda).

Comparison: A community organization in Speer and Hughey’s (1995) study had developed more niches than the two women’s groups of the Georgian PAR because the latter had only operated for six weeks and reached only the end of the first organizing cycle. For the same reason niches in the women’s groups emerged spontaneously as the group members recognized more tasks that were necessary for implementation of the community action plans while the community organization in Speer and Hughey (1995) planned niches before the process was launched with “the clear intention of promoting participation and increasing skills among all members” (p.743). Niches of the women’s groups and the community organization in Speer and Hughey (1995) were arranged in a similar way, horizontally, and filled as the organizations moved through the organizing cycle. Purpose of creating and rotating niches was to increase skills among members and enhance participation (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Interview data showed that members of the women’s groups had learned new skills in such a short time just by interacting in the women’s group and taking collective action despite the small number of niches. Although niches might accelerate the process of acquiring new skills interacting in an action group might be sufficient in the early stages of community organizing, especially if participants had little previous experience of community action and lacked many of the skills often involved. The new skills, whether acquired individually by taking on a niche or interaction in a group, might encourage the local PAR practitioners to continue take community action through

women's group thanks to some respondents' realization that community action could promote personal development.

4.2.3 Sustaining activity

Speer and Hughey (1995) assert that the most important element in the process of building an organization that can change power in a community is sustaining activity and levels of participation. Emotionally charged critical issues might inspire a large turnout at actions but if participants are not connected to the organization the events will become one-time events and social power is not developed (Robinson and Hanna, 1994 as cited in Speer and Hughey, 1995). Speer and Hughey (1995) found that enhancing relationships among organization members using the face-to-face assessment method was an efficient way to sustain a community organization to tackle another critical issue once one problem had been solved. Here I will investigate if the two women's groups of the Georgian PAR fulfill characteristics of a relationship-focused community organization. I will also investigate if members of the two groups reported any intention to continue take group action in their village even without the support of a researcher.

Findings: Neither of the two women's groups employed a face-to-face assessment tool like Speer and Hughey's (1995) community organizations. However, building relationships with other group members was recognized as one of the benefits of taking part in the Georgian PAR (Malichava, Monika, Tamara): "I could develop relationships with people of different ages. I don't know the other team members well. We just say hello in the bus." (Tamta). Weekly meetings provided a space for members of the women's groups to interact.

Several respondents from both women's groups were convinced of PAR having the necessary leverage for taking action in rural communities having applied the instrument only through the first organizing cycle (Magda, Medea, Miranda, Tamara, Tamta, Tea): "Next time we have a problem we can use the same format for solving it." (Malichava). Most respondents from the Akhlo group were convinced that chairperson of the town council would keep his promise of providing the necessary funds for installation of running water and that PAR could therefore be utilized for similar community projects (Malichava, Magda, Maia, Medea). Respondents from Akhlo group planned to use PAR for acquiring equipment and renovating other rooms of the health center (Miranda, Medea) or constructing a new one-storied clinic with all modern equipment (Monika). Respondents from Shori group were equally convinced that chairperson of the village council and the local businessman would provide the required funds as they had promised (Tamara, Tamta, Tea). Respondents from

Shori group said they would continue to use the PAR methodology, even without the support of a researcher and a facilitator, to ask a member of the national parliament who originates from Shori to help acquire furniture and equipment for the village health center (Tea), renovation of a bridge, a park (Tea) and a road, sewage and running water in houses (Tamta).

Two respondents, one from each group, nevertheless expressed a concern that PAR could be applied only in smaller-scale community projects (Tamara, Maia): “We could arrange a swimming pool in the village by turning to a business man or a private person. Team members have enough education to solve problems though project management but we don’t have funds and don’t know how to get them. It’s important to know local businessmen from Akhlo although they can’t help solve infrastructural problems.” (Maia).

Comparison: It is difficult to state with full certainty if the women’s groups of the Georgian PAR were relationship-focused like community organizations in Speer and Hughey’s (1995) study. In words of Speer and Hughey (1995, p.736): “Relationship-building is necessarily a long-term process; many one-on-ones must be conducted over time so that trust will develop, expectations will become clear, and interpersonal challenges can be made.”. Findings showed that members of both groups established new or enhanced existing relationships with group members, which might help sustain the groups. Interview data indicated also that positive response from chairpersons of town councils had convinced several participants of PAR’s potential to encourage action in rural communities.

4.3 How does literature on participatory action research complement the community empowerment theory?

The community empowerment theory provided an analytical framework for investigating the process that women’s groups of the Georgian PAR went through after the local female PAR practitioners had decided to form a group in order to take action in their villages. However, the community empowerment theory was developed using traditional social science research methods, instead of participatory action research, on data collected from a network of community organizations that had operated for two decades. The community empowerment theory thus does not provide any theoretical framework for analyzing the process of setting up a community organization. Participatory action research on the other hand is designed to address the challenge of not having a community organization by bringing groups of local people together to discuss and analyze their situation (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3). In this section I will briefly discuss in what ways literature on participatory action research might complement the community empowerment theory

by analyzing the role of a researcher, or an external agent, in entering a community and organizing people.

Well aware of the aforementioned shortcoming of the community empowerment theory for the analytical purpose of the thesis I asked respondents the following open-ended interview question: “Why did you decide to take action as a member of a group after attending a workshop?”. Several respondents answered that the researcher (me) played an important role because she gathered a group (Tamta, Malichava), gave practical advise on community action and encouraged. According to some respondents (Tamta, Malichava) the fact that a researcher entered a village and formed a group was a crucial factor for any community action to emerge. Advise received from a researcher during the PAR workshop that respondents deemed helpful included the following: (1) the local female participants could carry out a small scale community project to show to the town council that they are motivated, reliable and capable partners for larger scale community projects⁹ (Tea); (2) they could take action by themselves instead of waiting for the state to intervene as the impoverished state has not done much to benefit rural population after Georgia gained independence (Malichava, Miranda, Tea, Medea, Monika, Tamta), and (3) they could work in a group to improve the living conditions in the village (Malichava, Tamta, Tea, Maia, Magda, Medea, Miranda, Monika, Tamara). The preliminary analysis of the local socio-economic conditions in Samegrelo region conducted by the researcher (me) and the local facilitator most likely played a role in being able to provide advise during the PAR workshops that was assessed by respondents as relevant and helpful for taking community action. These interview results suggest that the researcher and the local facilitator-interpreter played the role of “consciousness raisers and catalysts for local discussions” (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, part 3, p.7) who contributed to provoking and organizing community action in the targeted villages which is one possible role of a participatory action researcher.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The results of the thesis indicate that participatory action research succeeded in initiating the three organizational-level processes that according to the community empowerment theory could lead to empowerment of the community organization. According to Speer and Hughey’s (1995) community empowerment theory assessment was an important phase of the organizing cycle from empowerment point of view by providing an opportunity to build and enhance relationships among

⁹ Other practical advise that the researcher (me) and the local facilitator gave during the PAR workshops included the following: (1) a community action plan helps to break a huge undertaking into manageable tasks; (2) it might be useful to identify resources available to the women and make the most use of them, and (3) there are plenty of funds granted for various rural community projects from a fund called Women’s fund in Georgia that the groups could apply for and information of relevant web sites (<http://www.womenfundgeorgia.org>).

organization's members. Stronger relationships were necessary for sustaining organizational activity and levels of participation. In the women's groups of the Georgian PAR assessment was conducted with speed and there was no time for building relationships. In the Georgian PAR relationships were built during weekly meetings and other activities of the action phase and therefore the different ways that assessment phases were conducted did not have any noticeable impact on empowerment on organizational level. Research phase of the organizing cycle was intentionally left out of the Georgian PAR in order to ground the research on an appreciative mode, instead of the deficit-based mode that many development aid projects are based on. Inter-organizational relationships were instead built during action phase of the organizing cycle.

The primary method employed by community organizations in Speer and Hughey's (1995) study to change allocation of community resources and power exercised around an issue was to organize a public event, gather hundreds of organization members and members of community, expose causes of the issue and demand for a different allocation of resources to correct an issue. The women's groups of the Georgian PAR used a different approach: they identified a community problem, asked for funds directly from local politicians (and from a local businessman in Shori's case) to correct the issue and took the lead of managing the project. The two town council's chairpersons' commitments to provide the requested funds the community projects is a signal that the women's groups of the Georgian PAR succeeded in taking action that was appropriate for the local conditions. In other words the local participants managed to adapt the knowledge harvested from a PAR workshop into the local conditions. This also suggests that co-creation of knowledge conducted by the external researcher (me), the local facilitator and the local participants bore fruit. The Georgian PAR had had an impact on some local participants' perception of social power, which was revealed through interviews during the reflection phase of the organizing cycle.

Creating and rotating niches aimed at increasing members' skills and participation in the community organization. Only a few niches had emerged in the women's groups of the Georgian PAR but respondents said having learned valuable, new skills by taking part in the common group activities (i.e. not niches) like the weekly meetings with the group and the PAR workshop. An opportunity to learn new skills was a source of motivation for the local participants to attend the PAR workshop, join the women's group and continue to take action as a member of the group. This confirms the community empowerment theory in that learning new skills plays a role in sustaining organizational activity. Instead of making a public event as a demonstration of organizational power and in that way putting pressure on local politicians the women's groups deemed it more efficient in the local context to approach the local politicians directly and ask for financing. Developing relationships with communal agencies therefore was the most important organizational-level process for achieving the

groups' goals, which was confirmed by several respondents. Commitments made by the local politicians for both groups to provide funding for their community initiatives had convinced all the respondents of PAR's potential as a change-maker. All respondents said they would continue to use PAR as a community development instrument for tackling other local issues even without the support of a researcher. Contribution of relationships with the group members in sustaining organizational activity, as suggested by the community empowerment theory, could not be stated with certainty because relationships require longer time to develop than what a thesis project could provide. Respondents reported having established meaningful relationships with other group members in only six weeks of the Georgian PAR but it is impossible to say if these relationships would be meaningful enough to sustain the organization.

The community empowerment theory that was my primary analytical tool for investigating the organizational-level processes that took place in the women's groups of the Georgian PAR was limited to analyzing existing organizations, or groups in this case. In order to form an understanding of the entire PAR process I complemented the community empowerment theory with literature on PAR and in particular on the role of an external researcher in organizing local people into action groups in a community where community organizations have not existed. Several respondents of this study confirmed knowledge from the PAR literature by affirming they would not have organized into an action group without an external intervention because it was not customary in Georgia. Co-creation of knowledge with an external action researcher in a PAR workshop made some local participants realize group effort could be the missing piece of the puzzle for making change happen. Support of a group consisting of female members of the community provided them with a space for sharing concerns, learning new skills, courage to approach local politicians, ideas how to solve local problems and a larger pool of resources that could be helpful in implementing community projects. The PAR workshop convinced two out of nine groups to at least try to take community action and the positive although modest results encouraged them to try the new skills for new projects. Results of this thesis suggest that PAR could have played the decisive role in initiating a process that according to the community empowerment theory included the organizational-level processes that could lead to empowerment of the organization and its members. The importance of PAR could arguable be in underlying the importance of a researcher to exit the ivory tower, also known as academia, and consciously engage with people outside the academia and intervene in order to facilitate community organizing. This might prove useful at least in cases such as Georgia where rural life has been characterized by stagnation for decades and members of a rural community cannot see themselves as a group. The two aspects that PAR literature could complement Speer and Hughey's (1995) community empowerment theory were thus the small but crucial role of an external action

researcher as an initiator of community organizing and co-creation of knowledge during the PAR workshops that convinced the local participants to give community action a try.

Other lessons I learned through the field work were that no matter how much effort an external participatory action researcher takes and how pressing the local problems are, it is almost impossible to map the complexity of all the variables that play a role in mobilizing people. One solution would therefore be to collaborate with as many communities as possible to maximize the chances that at least some communities would respond to the intervention by taking action. Besides, organizing one rural community into an action group might trigger a chain reaction by setting an example for other communities in the area. Such a chain reaction could also be induced intentionally. I think the Georgian PAR could have been much improved by introducing members of the two women's groups to each other so that they could share experiences, learn and inspire each other. This could have been an easy way to scale up the community action. It would have been interesting follow up on the community action taken by the two women's groups. My intention was to limit interaction with the women's groups during the Georgian PAR in order to make them as self-reliant as possible. Had I had the possibility to stay in Georgia for much longer time I would have conducted a PAR that would have fulfilled all the major characteristics of PAR including determining a research question and analyzing data with the local participants.

6 References

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7 Appendix

Interview guide

What is your age, educational background, work experience, ethnic group and current occupation?

Have you worked together as a group before the workshop?

Why not?

How did the workshop encourage you to take action?

What role did the different parts (discovery, dream, design, delivery, do it now!, dialogue) of the workshop play in taking action?

How did the workshop differ from other workshops aimed at taking action in your village if you have participated in any?

What has the group done after the workshop?

Please describe in detail all the tasks you have carried out or participated in as a member of the group.

Has the team made plans for implementing more things from the community action plan?

How did you decide which the activities would be chosen as the critical issue? Was it easy for the group to agree?

Are there any rules that regulate how the group functions?

What are the roles of other members of the group?

Have you developed new skills?

How do you interact with the group members outside the meetings?

Has working in the group affected your attitude/feeling towards your village and fellow villagers?

Are there any leaders in the group?

Why do you take an active part in the group?

DO you have a personal aim that you would like to achieve by taking part in the group activities?

How could the workshop be improved? What more could the facilitator give to the group?

Describe changes happening in 1) yourself 2) your families 3) your village/community as a result of working in the group?

How would it have been different if men had participated in all the activities?

What do the group members have in common?

What kind of roles do women living in your village have?