

Building a Foundation: an Introduction to Participatory Action Research

The “Building a Foundation” curriculum was designed by the Participatory Action Research Center for Education Organizing (PARCEO), an independent center that supports the work and organizing of community groups. All of PARCEO’s trainings are based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and popular education which value the experience and leadership of those most affected by injustice as we collectively work to affect change and build community power.

This training grew from the needs of two parent groups, the Center for Immigrant Families (CIF), which is now Parent Leadership Project (PLP) in upper Manhattan and La Union based in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. It also builds from the CIF curriculum created and implemented with low-income immigrant parents of color in Public School District 3, New York City.

Both parent groups wanted their organizing to be participant-led and rooted in their community. This required a framework that could draw from personal experience and wisdom to build collective skills, establish shared leadership, and offer concrete planning for sustainable organizing. “Building a Foundation” was critical to the work of CIF and La Union as they built member leadership and organized for educational justice.

“Building a Foundation” provides concrete organizing skills and methodologies rooted in community processes, which are modeled throughout the two sessions. The purpose of this training is to provide a foundation to collectively envision and build sustainable processes for our work.

In the first session, participants understand the ways in which PAR supports a process of building knowledge that is rooted in the voices and personal experience of community members. This session covers what PAR is, the principles of PAR and key vocabulary words that describe participatory processes of building knowledge collectively. Through group discussions, creative expression and activities, participants learn and model key PAR principles and terms.

The second session continues to cover key PAR principles. Participants collectively explore how to integrate PAR into different areas of our work. We share migration stories, which leads to an analysis and planning of current work and organizing processes.

Goal of this training: Participants gain the tools and resources to build a foundation for sustained organizing rooted in the wisdom and knowledge of those involved. Through the training, participants gain the skills and resources to address their experiences and specific needs and build a sustainable foundation for their work. All of our trainings end with collective reflection, where participants have a chance to share what they learned from the training and what they hope to continue to explore.

Objectives:

- Develop a foundational understanding of PAR-based principles of organizing
- Build skills and leadership
- Identify concrete issues and challenges
- Begin to develop strategies and a plan of action for working with your organization or collaborating with a community group



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Building a Foundation: An Introduction to Participatory Action Research

SESSION I: What is PAR?

(Total Time: 1 hour 30 minutes)

Goal of Session I: Participants explore PAR through key terms and principles about how this framework enables a process of building knowledge rooted in personal experience and wisdom.

Materials for Session I:

- Agenda
- Paper
- Chart/Butcher paper
- Pen/Marker (enough for all participants)
- Video link/Internet/monitor



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A. Welcome (25 minutes)

Framing: A chance to get to know the group and gauge their exposure to PAR. Together the group develops discussion guidelines for the training. The icebreaker highlights what people already know about PAR and the generation of knowledge in general. There are no right answers in this open discussion.

Introductions (10 minutes)

Action: Facilitators welcome the group and guide introductions; participants share their name, group they are a part of or working with and if they have heard of PAR or popular education before? If so, where?

***Facilitator note: Facilitators** can ask any questions relevant to the group, like how this training could help your work? What are your expectations for this training? etc.

Overview of Training and Discussion Guidelines (5 minutes)

Talking Point: Facilitator A provide overview of the two sessions of the training.

Facilitator B introduce the group discussion with this guiding question:

- What are some guidelines for how we want to engage with each other in this training?



Action: Facilitator B write responses clearly on butcher paper for everyone to see and add comments.



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Icebreaker- Word Association Game (10 minutes)

Talking Points: **Facilitator A** explain that as each word is read, participants “popcorn” share their word associations. There are no right or wrong answers. This is an open discussion.

Actions: **Facilitator A** start by reading one of the following words. Participants go around the room and share their responses to the word.

Facilitator B write the words for everyone to see; write responses to the words as they are shared.

- Social change
- Action
- Research
- Researcher
- Expertise
- Knowledge
- Participatory

****Facilitator note:** **Facilitator B** write each word with enough room to record responses. Facilitators can also group words together.*

Connection to next activity: These words represent key ideas within PAR which we will look at more specifically in our overview of PAR and throughout the training.

B. Brief Description of PAR

(10 minutes)

Framing: *Through an overview and background of PAR, we consider key vocabulary that will be unpacked in greater detail throughout the training.*

Action: **Facilitator B** give a brief history of PAR using the “Overview of PAR” handout (Handout 1B). **Facilitator A** introduce the following key terms and their definitions:

1. Mutuality
2. Social Transformation
3. Storytelling

Talking Points: **Facilitator A** define the key terms, inviting feedback and responses from the group.



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- ❖ **Mutuality** generates knowledge together, and recognizes wisdom and expertise without privileging one voice over another. Mutuality also recognizes that the experiences of those most impacted by injustice should be at the center of the discussion.
- ❖ **Social Transformation** makes change through community power in which the community is at the forefront. This is different from outside “experts” coming in and setting the agenda.
- ❖ **Storytelling** shares personal experiences in an interactive process where everyone’s story is valued. Through storytelling connections are made, common experiences are threaded, and community is built.

Connection to Next Activity: The overview and key terms are the base for discussions during the training.

C. Discussion of PAR Quotes (40 minutes)

Framing: *The purpose of this activity is for participants to explore and develop their understanding of mutuality, social transformation, and the importance of storytelling through the discussion of a PAR quote, and relating it to their own experiences. Participants also can depict their experiences of PAR-in-action in a creative way. We model PAR again when each group shares reflections, stories and drawings with the whole group.*

Small Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Actions: Participants break into small groups. **Facilitator B** ask each group to choose a quote to explore from the Quote Handout. Group members work together to read and discuss their quote and then create a visual representation (diagram, scene, etc.) of what PAR looks like to them.

Talking Points: **Facilitators** encourage groups to consider what was shared in the overview of PAR, how it connects to these quotes and how these quotes reflect the key terms: Mutuality, Social Transformation, and Storytelling.

***Facilitator Note:** *See discussion Handout 1D for quotes*



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Large Group Report Back (25 minutes)

Action: Group comes back together to share their piece with the larger group

Talking Points: Facilitators make connections between groups sharing and the principles of PAR

Connection to Next Activity: This discussion activates participants' own knowledge while building a deeper understanding of these three PAR terms so that participants can readily identify them in the video in following section.

BREAK (10 minutes)

D. Video: Work, Dignity, and Social Change (15 minutes)

Framing: *The purpose of watching this video is to see a real life example of what we have discussed in this session: key principles and terms, building community, knowledge, and leadership collectively and rooted in community processes.*

Watch the clip (5 minutes)

<http://www.argentinavideo.org/getvideo.html>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1yMoPCo6PE>

Action: Facilitators show excerpt from the education section of the PAR-based video *Work, Dignity and Social Change*, about the Unemployed Workers' Movement of Argentina (5 minutes).



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Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Facilitators guide discussion as participants share reflections on the video.

Talking Points: make connections to what was discussed during the session: what is PAR and key terms.

E. Closing (10 minutes)

Framing: Reflections highlight the group's collective knowledge and gauge understanding of concepts and areas for further exploration.

Action: Facilitator A ask participants to share one thing that moved or challenged them and one thing that they would like to see more or less of in the next session.

Facilitator B take notes on chart paper.

Talking Point: Facilitator B ask participants to think about their own or their family's migration story so that they can share these during Session 2.

***Facilitator note:** Facilitators hold on to images made during the Quote activity, or ask participants to bring them for Session 2. Document the chart/butcher paper and anything else that could be helpful for the facilitator debrief and to show the work from the day.



SESSION 2: Key Concepts of PAR

(Total time: 1 hour and 50 minutes)

Goal of Session 2: For participants to explore and model PAR principles and processes of social transformation. Participants share migration stories and connect what they learned in Session 1 with a critical analysis of their current work. At the end of this session participants create an action plan and develop next steps to sustain their work.

Materials:

- Agenda
- Chart/Butcher paper
- Pen/Marker (enough for all participants)

****Facilitator Note:** Before starting, **Facilitators** display/share the images that participants created in Session 1. Refer to these throughout the session.*



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A. Welcome and Introductions

(10 minutes)

Framing: Participants reacquaint themselves with PAR concepts from the previous session. Sharing reflections in this activity helps connect the two sessions.

Names and Agenda (5 minutes)

Talking Points: **Facilitator A** ask participants to say their name and share something from the previous session that stayed with them.

Actions: Participants and **Facilitators** take turns responding.

Action: **Facilitator B** go over the agenda.

***Facilitator note:** while going over the agenda, use the reflections that were shared to make connections to the activities and goals of this session.

Connection to Next Activity: Participants use the reflections to build deeper understandings of the three key principles of PAR in the following discussion.

Framing: Overview of the terms *Mutuality, Social Transformation and Storytelling* discussed in Session 1. Here we relate these concepts to participants' own stories and work.

Introductory Remarks (5 minutes)

Talking Points: **Facilitator A** give a brief review and expand on the three key principles of PAR and popular education discussed in Session 1 (Activities B and C) pointing to the drawings around the room. Facilitators explain that we will build on the concepts of Mutuality, Storytelling and Social Transformation.

Connection to Next Activity: Elaborate on the terms and concepts.



B. Mutuality (10 minutes)

Framing: Using the cartoon handout 2B, participants discuss the relationship between the cartoon and PAR. Together the group develops a list of PAR concepts that the cartoon reflects and how it connects to the participants' work.

Action: **Facilitator A** pass out copies of the cartoon. **Facilitator B** guide the group discussion.

Talking Points: **Facilitator B** ask participants to consider what aspects of PAR the cartoon shows. This may include: non-hierarchical relationships, banking education, or similar concepts. Some possible framing questions:

- What do you see?
- What are the men doing?
- Who has power?
- What is the artist saying to us?
- Does this remind you of PAR principles? Why or why not?
- Where do we see this kind of interaction in our lives?
- How would you transform it?

*** Facilitator Note:** You do not have to ask all of these questions, just the ones that resonate with the group.

Connection to Next Activity: Using the idea of mutuality and collective learning we consider how our family migration stories offer powerful knowledge to share with others.



C. Storytelling Exercise

(25 minutes)

Framing: Through sharing migration stories, participants identify the knowledge contained in each other's experience and recognize the power of storytelling. These discoveries are used to facilitate a group discussion on "Why stories matter?" and how we learn from each other.

Sharing Migration Stories (15 min)

***Facilitator note:** if you have more than 15 participants with various language needs, it may be more helpful to do this activity in small groups before reconvening with the larger group. Use your judgment on how to best do this activity based on the group's size and language needs.

Action: Facilitator B post the guiding questions on butcher/chart paper. If done as a small group activity, **Facilitator A** break participants into small groups (3-5) and give directions for the activity. Otherwise, **Facilitator A** give directions to the entire group.

Talking Points: Facilitator A ask each person to spend a few minutes talking about one thing in their own or in their family's migration history. Guiding questions may include:

- Why did you/your family come here?
- How did you come here?
- Who did you come here with?
- Who or what did you leave behind?

***Facilitator note:** encourage an environment of confidentiality and trust. Also, if participants do not want to share, that is okay.



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Storytelling Follow-up Discussion (10 minutes):

Action [if small group activity]: Small groups come back together to share with the whole group. **Facilitator B** guide discussion. **Facilitator A** take notes on butcher/chart paper.

Action [if large group activity] Once everyone has had a chance to share their migration story, the group moves to the follow-up discussion. **Facilitator B** guide discussion. **Facilitator A** take notes on butcher/chart paper.

Talking points: **Facilitator B** guide the discussion to consider why stories make it possible to build connections, how stories drive our work and shape who we are. Possible guiding questions:

- What did you learn from each other in this process?
- Why do our stories matter?
- How are stories a part of our work?

Connection to Next Activity: Use the power of storytelling and mutuality to consider how we can bring about social transformation with others.

D. Social Transformation

(10 minutes)

Framing: *Discuss the quote and connect it to the previous discussion. This helps participants understand how social transformation is a process initiated by and rooted in community.*

Action: **Facilitator B** display and read the quote “Nothing about us, without us, is for us.” **Facilitator A** guide the discussion.

Talking Points: **Facilitator A** read the quote used by indigenous Australian activists, South African activists and others: “Nothing about us without us is for us.” Think about how you know what is best for you? How do you know what your needs are? Guiding questions:

- What does it mean?
- What can you think of that is supposed to be for you but was developed without you?
- How does this relate back to the migration stories?
- How does this relate to our work?



BREAK (15 minutes)

E. Reviewing Work through a PAR Lens (10 minutes)

Framing: Working in small groups, participants use their understanding of PAR to critically examine their own work.

***Facilitator note:** Before the session, go through the following questions and determine which three questions you want to use. Feel free to add any other questions you think will be helpful for this activity.

Actions: **Facilitator A** post butcher/chart paper with questions for consideration.* **Facilitator B** explain the activity and read the questions. Participants split into small groups [with those in the same organization, if applicable] and answer questions on chart paper.

Talking Point: Facilitators ask groups to think about:

- What is the focus of your work?
- Is the work you do helping to create more justice in your community? How?
- Is the work you do helping to create more justice with another community? How?
- In your work, do some voices matter more than others?
- How do you know that you are making good decisions in your work?
- What elements of PAR do you see in your work?
- What elements of PAR may be missing from your work?



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F. Planning Future Work

(25 minutes)

Framing: Groups should walk away from this training with a clear idea of next steps for their work and activities to carry them out.

Actions: Facilitators encourage participants to consider how PAR can help them achieve their next steps. In this activity participants work in small groups to plan their future work, connecting their needs and realities to what they have learned about PAR in these two sessions. Both **Facilitators** are available to work with small groups.

Talking points: Facilitator A explain that participants will consider activities to help them move forward in their work, thinking about the following three areas:

1. The process of collective visioning
2. The elements of rooting your work in PAR
3. An Action Plan, including next steps

Facilitator's note: The goal is not to carry out each of these steps, but to think of activities that the group can do together to accomplish these steps. This is information that they can bring back to their groups.

G. Closing and Evaluation

(10 minutes)

Talking point: Facilitators ask everyone to share one thing from the day that will be useful for their work.

Action: Facilitators collect feedback on the training from participants. **Facilitators** take notes to incorporate for future sessions.

***Facilitator's note:** **Facilitators** close the session and document the chart/butcher paper and anything else that could be helpful for the facilitator debrief and to show the work from the day.



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PARCEO's Building a Foundation: an Introduction to Participatory Action Research Material List Session I and II

Session I

Agenda

Why PAR Handout

Quotes Handouts

Video-Argentina Unemployed Workers' Movement: <http://www.argentinavideo.org/getvideo.html>

Butcher/Chart Paper

Markers/pens

Session II

Agenda

Cartoon Handout

Sharing Our Stories, Guiding Questions on Chart Paper

Reviewing Our Work through a PAR Lens, Guiding Questions on Chart Paper

Butcher/Chart Paper

Markers/Pens





Building a Foundation: An Introduction to Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Agenda Session 1

- i. Introduction**
- ii. Icebreaker**
- iii. Brief Description of PAR**
- iv. PAR Quotes-Small group activity**
- Break**
- v. Video: Work, Dignity and Social Change**
- vi. Closing**





What is PAR?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a framework for engaging in research and organizing for social justice that is rooted in a community's own knowledge, wisdom, and experience. PAR recognizes that those most impacted by systemic injustice are in the best position to understand and analyze their needs and challenges and to organize for social change.

In a PAR-generated process:

The outcomes can **take many shapes** and forms depending on what the group determines together, but it is the group's own agenda and not someone else's.

We engage in **collective research and organizing** to build community and make change.

The work is about **generating and building knowledge together** in order to define the change we seek to make. This begins with telling our own stories, which centers our own experiences.

Community members are recognized as experts, and all participants are considered both teachers and learners. Too often, outside "experts" come in to identify and address a community's problems, and PAR challenges this notion of who has the expertise.

We work intentionally and always think carefully about **whose voices are being heard, who is making decisions, and how we are moving forward**. We consider our roles, position, and privilege in relation to changing conditions of injustice.

Like popular education, it is a broad framework that is **participatory, collective, critical, and reflective**, building from the work of Orlando Fals-Borda, Paulo Freire, and many others. It is not a neutral process and actively builds community strength and leadership to change unjust conditions.





Quotes for Session 1, Activity D

Facilitator Note: Before the session, go through the following quotes and pick several that you feel are relevant to the groups and individuals participating in the training. During the activity, each group will choose two quotes to discuss and share with the whole group. You can choose as many or as few quotes to share with the groups.

a) Storytelling:

“We come from the oral tradition of storytelling, which requires a telling and a listening passed on from our ancestors, elders, and family. Our stories have the power to heal and to transform ourselves and our communities. They convey our history, lessons, culture and spirit.”

- Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, Coatlique Theatre Company

“Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.”

- Tafoya, 1995, cited in Shawn Wilson, “Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods”

c) Primacy of Experience:

“I go out on the lake to pull the net, and this is PAR within an Indigenous knowledge paradigm. My father, who passed in 1988 to the spirit world, comes and has this conversation with me: “You have to bring the kids, my grandchildren. You have to bring them here so they can fish like this. They have to have the experience, they can’t learn without the experience. You can talk about it but that is nothing, it doesn’t mean a thing. They have to do it and they have to do it repeatedly.” Repeatedly, because if you try to do it only once, it is not going to be part of who you are. In other words, you will not be transformed, and you will not be enhancing somebody else’s experiences, which is what transformation is about.”

- Cora Weber-Pillwax, “When Research Becomes a Revolution: Participatory Action Research with Indigenous Peoples”

“It is not enough to be in opposition. We also need to generate alternative knowledge and images, making new visions out of the mud of our current interpretations.”

- dian marino, “Wild Garden”



d) Transformation:

“Social science needs to be socially just in its processes as well as its outcomes.”

- Cynthia Chambers and Helen Balanoff, “Translating Participation from North to South: A Case against Intellectual Imperialism in Social Science Research”

“When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart— a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with la Coatlicue that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else.”

- Gloria Anzaldúa, “Borderlands/La Frontera”

e) Learning is Political and Engaged:

“Learning is not a neutral process – staying idle is maintaining a position, just as movement is never directionless.”

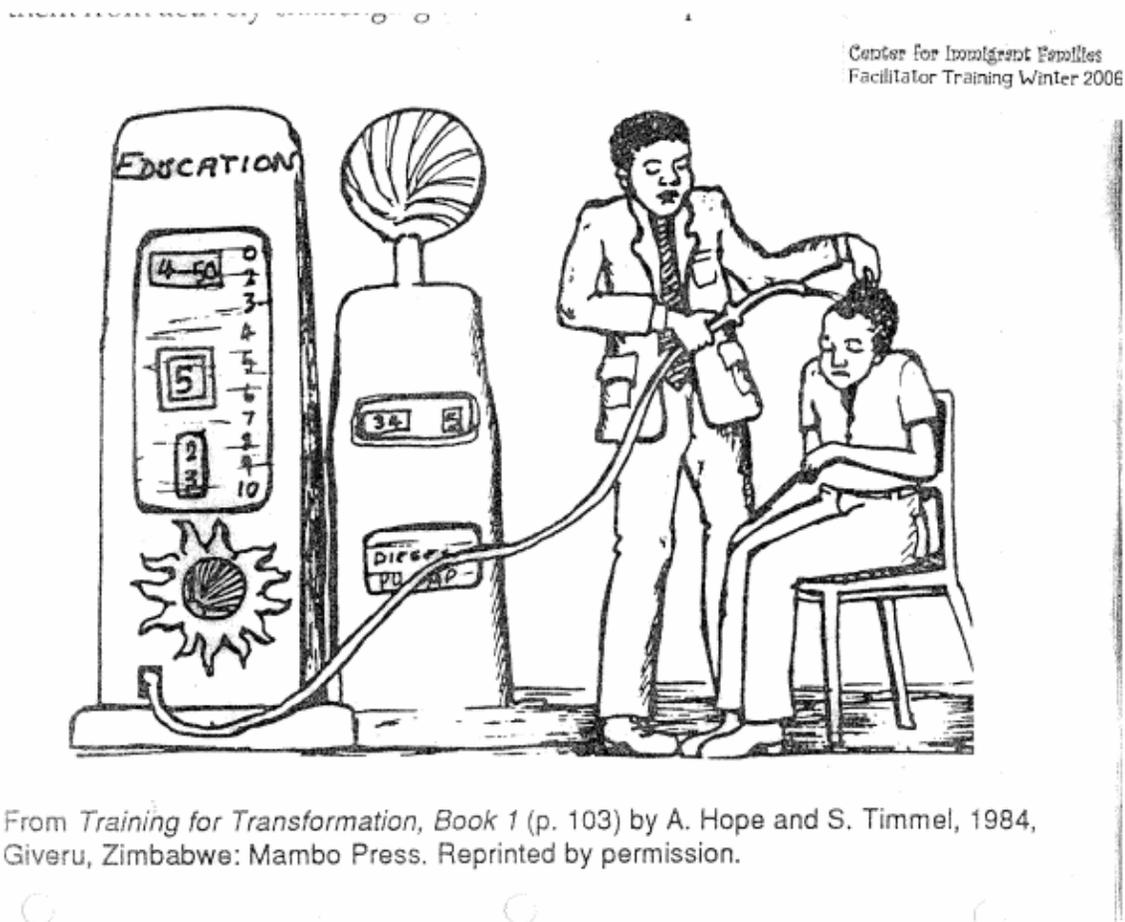
- dian marino, “Wild Garden”



Building a Foundation: An Introduction to Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Agenda Session 2

- i. Welcome**
- ii. Introductory Remarks**
- iii. Mutuality—Group discussion**
- iv. Storytelling Exercise**
- v. Storytelling Follow-up Discussion**
- vi. Social Transformation Discussion**
- Break**
- vii. Reviewing Work through a PAR Lens—Small group discussion**
- viii. Planning Future Work—Small group discussion**



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