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Abstract

This chapter discusses how research can be part of a social action agenda to build new economies. This research is based on collaborations between researchers and research participants, and involves three interwoven strategies. The first focuses on developing new languages of economy; the second, on decentring economic subjectivity; and the third, on collective actions to consolidate and build economic initiatives. The chapter illustrates how these strategies feature in three research projects. The first project was based in the Philippines and involved working with an NGO and two municipalities to pilot pathways for endogenous economic development. The second project was based in the US Northeast and used participatory mapping techniques to reveal the use and stewardship of marine resources. The third project was based in Australia and focused on environmentally sustainable and socially and economically just forms of manufacturing. These projects resulted in collective actions that created new economic options.

Introduction

Since the late 1940s, some social science researchers have sought to disrupt knowledge hierarchies and counter what has been called the 'extractive' model of research in which researchers take and use knowledge from research participants. In the 1960s and 1970s, this approach gained more acceptance thanks to the pioneering work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and others in parts of Latin America and Africa and in India (Kindon et al. 2007). These efforts to involve research participants in the research process, and for researchers and participants to work together towards social action and change is variously called Action Research, Participatory Action Research and Participatory Research. This research approach can take different forms, reflecting the range of its roots and uses around the globe. In this Chapter, we discuss how the approach has been taken up in diverse economies research.

In diverse economies research there is an emphasis on economic practices which prioritise interdependence (between humans and between humans and the non-human world). Diverse economies researchers are interested in the ways that people are already engaged in these types of practices (albeit sometimes in nascent ways) and how research can play a practical role in helping to strengthen such economic practices. We characterise this as a form of Action Research to highlight how research can be part of the social action agenda to build new economies.

In earlier writing (e.g. Cameron and Gibson 2005a), we described our research as a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR). At the time this was an appropriate descriptor. Consistent with the familiar understanding of PAR, we were collaborating with groups who could be portrayed as disempowered, and economically and socially marginalised. Increasingly, however, we have been collaborating with groups that could hardly be described in these terms (such as the manufacturing firms that we will discuss in this chapter). This reflects our recognition that economic diversity is everywhere in the world (in households, in neighbourhoods, in community groups and associations, in schools, in businesses),¹ and that this diversity is the seedbed for new economies built on the recognition of interdependence. Thus, our research involves collaboration with research participants who are scattered throughout the diverse economy, working with them to help strengthen and create economic practices that might be the basis of new economies that enact interdependence.

Action research for diverse economies uses three main strategies. The first is focused on language and reflects the understanding that words have a crucial role to play not just in describing the world but in shaping the sorts of actions and possibilities that are considered feasible. Action research for diverse economies has to grapple with the ways that economies are described and the effects these words have. Invariably, diverse economies researchers come up against portrayals of economies that limit what is considered feasible, and therefore have to weave new languages of economy that expand options for action. The second strategy for action research for diverse economies is focused on what is known as economic subjectivity, that is the ways that people imagine themselves in relation to economic practices. When economic practices are defined with respect to capitalism then economic subjectivity is similarly defined in capitalist terms, for example, one is a worker, a manager, an owner, a consumer, a shareholder, an investor or an entrepreneur. But when economic practices are located in a diverse economy then economic subjectivity is not confined to a small repertoire of subject positions. People occupy multiple subject positions such as carer, volunteer, reciprocator, partner and co-operator, as well as those positions listed above. Thus economic subjectivity becomes shaped by a myriad of concerns, desires and identifications. New languages of economy work hand-in-hand with this decentring of the subject. However, diverse economies researchers invariably come up against strong attachments to current forms of economic subjectivity and therefore have to find ways of opening subjects to new possibilities. The combination of new languages of economy and the decentring of economic subjectivity provide the foundation for the third strategy, the undertaking of collective actions to build new forms of economies. These actions are not known in advance but emerge from the research process as diverse economies researchers and participants start to use the new languages of economy to explore how they might become new types of economic subjects. The collective actions also continue well beyond the life of a research project.

¹ Indeed, even capitalist businesses can include diverse economic practices. Some of the manufacturing businesses discussed in this chapter are capitalist. For more on the potential of capitalist businesses see Chapter 2.

In this chapter, we discuss three projects conducted by a range of researchers who have drawn on diverse economies thinking and deployed the three strategies introduced above in projects across the globe. We start by introducing the three projects.² The “Community Partnering Project” was based in the Philippines in the rural municipalities of Jagna on the island of Bohol and Linamon in northern Mindanao. The project was a collaboration with the NGO Unlad Kabayan Migrant Services Foundation Inc. (an organisation that helps overseas Filipino migrant workers to invest their savings back into community-based projects in the Philippines) and two local municipalities to whom responsibility for local economic development had been recently devolved. The project was designed to pilot pathways for endogenous economic development.³

The “Atlas Project” was based in the US Northeast and used participatory mapping techniques with fishing communities to map the use and stewardship of marine resources by commercial fishermen.⁴ At the time, new geotechnologies were helping fisheries scientists and managers recognise the rich heterogeneity of the marine environment; however, understandings of the humans who fished the marine environment was limited. This participatory project sought to address this gap.⁵

The “Shifting Cultures of Manufacturing Project” was based in Australia and focused on a selection of manufacturing firms that were running viable businesses while also prioritising environmental sustainability, socio-economic justice or a combination of the two. The research was designed to reveal a range of possible future pathways for Australian manufacturing.⁶

Each of these projects, while very different in focus, used the three strategies introduced above. Initially, each encountered a portrayal of the economy that illuminated a narrow set of features and had the effect of limiting the options for economic development, and so steps were taken to activate new languages of economy that would help reframe economic

² We have selected these three projects because of their range of geographic locations and topics. Other action research projects by diverse economies researchers include those discussed in this volume by Leo Hwang (Chapter 57) and Abby Templer Rodrigues (Chapter 46), and the Pioneer Valley Alternative Economies Project (see Community Economies Collective 2001), the Community Partnering Project in Australia (see Cameron and Gibson 2005a and b), the Newcastle Community Gardening Project (see Cameron, 2011), the Empower project with the community group, Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement (Healy, 2015), and the Growing Food Economies Workshop in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines (Cameron et al., 2014).

³ The research was funded by the Australian Research Council and Australia’s official development assistance agency, AusAID (Grant No. LP0347118, ‘Negotiating alternative economic strategies for regional development in Indonesia and the Philippines’). The research team included Amanda Cahill, Katherine Gibson and Deirdre McKay.

⁴ ‘Fishermen’ is the preferred term used by both women and men who harvest fish in this part of the US (St Martin & Hall-Arber 2007, 59).

⁵ The research was funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration through the Northeast Consortium (Grant No. 01-840, ‘An atlas-based audit of fishing territories, local knowledge and community participation in fisheries science and management’). The research team included Madeleine Hall-Arber, Kevin St Martin and Rob Snyder.

⁶ The research was funded by the Australian Research Council (Grant No. DP160101674, ‘Reconfiguring the enterprise: shifting manufacturing culture in Australia’). The research team included Jenny Cameron, Katherine Gibson, Stephen Healy and Joanne McNeill.

possibilities. Each also grappled with familiar but limited forms of economic subjectivity and had to find ways to animate new economic subject positions. Building on the attention to language and subjectivity, each of the projects resulted in collective actions that created new economic options. In what follows we take each strategy in turn and discuss how the strategy featured in each project.

Activating New Languages

The Community Partnering Project encountered the dominant understanding of rural municipalities and rural residents in the Philippines as lacking the resources and capacity for economic development. This understanding meant that development solutions were thought to lie outside municipalities, through strategies such as out-migration as overseas workers or securing external funding for infrastructure projects that would then underpin further inward investment (Gibson et al., 2010). To counter this understanding and development approach, the project inventoried the diverse economic practices that maintained livelihoods and identified the assets and capacities of people, associations, and environments in each community.⁷ Local residents drawn from marginalized groups (itinerant labourers, older women farmers, young mothers) were employed as community researchers to work with their neighbours to document transactions, labour practices and enterprise forms in the municipality. What emerged from this exercise was evidence of “the rich patchwork of market and non-market exchanges, paid and unpaid labour and capitalist and non-capitalist surplus generating enterprises that work together to sustain livelihoods” (McKay et al., 2007, 62). A newly differentiated language of the local economy began to emerge and provided the basis for the subsequent steps in the project (as we discuss in the following sections).

The Atlas Project encountered the widely held view in the US Northeast that fishing stocks were in decline and that the fishing communities that relied on these stocks were dying. For many fishermen this representation produced a sense of foreboding that not only were their own livelihoods doomed but there was no future in fishing for their children or their children’s children. The academic researchers in collaboration with fishermen used log book data from vessels based in different ports that used a range of fishing gear to generate maps that told a new story of how fishermen interacted with the marine environment. St Martin and Hall-Arber describe the effect of these maps in the following way: “[f]ishermen were seeing for the first time an outline of the territories and locations of greatest importance to them and their ‘communities’” (2007, 55). At the fishermen’s request, the log book data had been superimposed onto the standard nautical maps that the fishermen used as an everyday working tool. But in place of a space devoid of human activity, the new maps showed the richness of the social and economic landscape of fishing territories and the communities supported by these territories. The new maps provided a visual language of human-non-human interconnection that captured the imagination of fishermen across the

⁷ The approach used drew on an earlier pilot project conducted in Australia (see Cameron and Gibson, 2001, 2005a, 2005b), which in turn drew on the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993).

region and drew them into discussion not about the decline of fisheries and their communities but their use of and interaction with the marine environment. This new portrayal of their everyday working world became the foundation for hitherto unthinkable possibilities and actions (as we will discuss shortly).

The Shifting Cultures of Manufacturing Project also encountered a dominant representation of decline. In Australia, the manufacturing sector is represented as being in demise in comparison to growth in other sectors such as the service sector and the financial sector, and the future of the manufacturing is consistently under question. Those working in manufacturing were concerned that this prevalent representation was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, they reported instances when parents and educators had been convinced by the representation of decline and discouraged their children and students from considering a career in manufacturing; at the same time, some manufacturers were struggling to find skilled employees raising the possibility of off-shoring to places where the skilled workforce could be found. As a counter to this representation the research team drew on data about the extent of manufacturing activity across Australia,⁸ but also identified and researched examples of manufacturers who were doing more than 'merely' running an economically viable operation but were also manufacturing in ways that address two critical challenges for the 21st century, environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality. The research initially involved interviews with owners, managers and employees in these manufacturing firms, followed by workshops in which the research team presented the main findings back to the manufacturers.⁹ To describe the crucial contribution that these manufacturers were making, the research team used the language of 'just sustainability', a phrase coined by Agyeman et al. (2003, 5) to describe the importance of addressing "a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems". This phrase was new to the manufacturers, but it was one that resonated. It helped to 'name' in a concise way what some saw themselves as doing explicitly, and for others it helped identify what they sensed they were doing, but had not had the time or opportunity to reflect on. As we discuss in the next sections, this phrase became a pivotal point of identification for the manufacturers involved and has led to a series of actions.

The three research projects encountered representations of lack and decline. In response the projects sought to expand possibilities and as a first step they developed new languages: the language of diverse community and economic assets in the first project; a new visual mapping language, in the second; and a powerful phrase, in the third. All research can be said to be performative in the way it uses specific languages (in the sense of concepts, vocabulary, images and so on) to represent and enact the world in particular ways. However, not all research reflects on the language that it uses, the representations that it generates and the impacts of these representations. In the case of action research for diverse economies there is often a focus on using languages and representations to counter

⁸ For example, that fact that manufacturing employs almost a million people (or ten per cent of the Australian workforce) and the fact that in the twelve months to August 2018, manufacturing had the largest increase in employment of any sector (Scutt, 2018).

⁹ These workshops generally included all those who had been interviewed.

dominant economic narratives and reveal the existing economic diversity and economic possibilities that all-too-often lie dormant and unrealised.

Shifting Subjectivities

Building on the activation of new languages, a second strategy in action research for diverse economies focuses on shifts in subjectivity. The new language can reveal new possibilities but responding to and acting on these possibilities requires a shift in how researchers and participants position themselves as economic subjects.

In the Community Partnering Project in the Philippines, the inventorying of diverse economic activities and assets had the effect of shifting participants' sense of their own capacities. A wide range of skills and knowledges were identified, including, for example, technical farming skills, food processing and craft skills, and basic marketing and accounting knowledge (Cahill, 2008). The inventorying exercise, which participants conducted in small groups with the community researchers, "challenged the common assumption many participants, NGO and government staff held of people in the community as somehow deficient and needing more training" (Cahill, 2008, 299). This was the beginning of a shift from a subject position of economic lack (as 'just' a farmer or 'just' a labourer) to one of economic capacity and confidence as a community entrepreneur. It was also a recognition of the multiple identities and subject positions that people occupy. This shift continued as participants learned more about the skills and knowledge of others in the community. Some participants began to imagine themselves as initiating and running community-based enterprises. To help consolidate this shift, the research team organised field trips so groups of interested participants could learn more about community-based enterprises in nearby municipalities. The effect of this was potent, as Cahill recalls, "[p]articipants were amazed and inspired to see people 'just like them' succeed in business" (2008, 299). This is not to say that the shift in subjectivity was easy. As Cahill notes, participants had to counter their own and other people's disbelief and even cynicism that the rural poor could operate community-based enterprises.

In the Atlas Project, fishermen largely had a sense of themselves as powerless in the face of changes around them and there was widespread lament for a way of life they felt was disappearing (St Martin and Hall-Arber, 2007). As well, the fishermen had to contend with a fisheries science and management framework that positioned them as centred subjects who acted as competing and self-interested individuals roaming across the fishing grounds in search of the best catches (St Martin, 2009). The new maps offered a different framing of the fishermen. By mapping aggregate fishing trips by port and type of fishing gear, a picture emerged of fishing territories whereby fishermen from the same port and using the same fishing gear tended to fish in the same areas. Furthermore, in the process of producing these maps, fishermen were prompted to discuss their local fishing practices and environmental knowledge, the cooperative (rather than competitive) relationships between fishermen, and their experiences of and ideas for area-based fisheries management. Both the maps and the process of producing them helped to consolidate a sense of the fishermen

as communal subjects who are part of a 'community-at-sea' that shares a fishing commons. St Martin (2009, 503-4) notes that expressions of individual demands, needs, hardships, or desires were displaced by a more collective voice as fishermen repositioned themselves as peer group and community members. As we will discuss shortly this shift in their sense of self was crucial for the collective actions that followed.

In the Shifting Cultures of Manufacturing Project, a similar shift from an individual to a collective subject was discerned. This took place through a series of workshops that the research team conducted individually with each manufacturer, culminating in a group workshop with all the manufacturers. At the individual workshops the research team presented back to the manufacturers the results of interviews with owners, managers and employees framed in terms of the features of just sustainability that were evident in the business; the conditions and strategies that were enabling the firm to enact the various dimensions of just sustainability; and the challenges to just sustainability. Although the focus was on the individual enterprise, participants in the workshops were curious about the other manufacturers and what they were doing in terms of just sustainability. A larger one-day workshop attended by all the manufacturers provided the opportunity for the representatives from each manufacturer to learn more about the just sustainability dimensions of each other's enterprises. In this process a shared sense of a collective subjectivity based on ethical manufacturing began to emerge (albeit in nascent form). This cut across other forms of business subjectivity (such as the positioning of family-based manufacturers as part of a network of family businesses and the positioning of the cooperative manufacturers as part of a network of cooperatives). This subjectivity consolidated around the suggestion by one manufacturer and strongly supported by the other participants that the workshop participants collectively produce a public declaration on just and sustainable manufacturing in Australia.

Collective Action

The third strategy in action research for diverse economies involves collective action, especially action focused on the creation of new economic possibilities. Action is initiated during the project but continues well-beyond the formal span of the project, and outcomes can be unpredictable as the research participants incorporate the new language of economy and shifts in economic subjectivity into their own lives.

In the Community Partnering Project, collective action took the form of groups of participants working together to initiate and operate community-based social enterprises. The focus on groups of people working together was important as this tapped into existing economic practices and logics (such as the practice and logic of CIVAC, a form of cooperative and volunteer labour involving local residents carrying out municipal repair work).¹⁰ This was an important counter to the imported mind-set of business entrepreneurialism as being based on individual or household-run micro-enterprises (such as tiny street-side *sari sari*

¹⁰ For more on the range of labour practices see Gibson-Graham, 2006, 176.

grocery stores) (Community Economies Collective and Gibson, 2009). The enterprises that were initiated included the Laca Ginger Tea Community Enterprise, Jagna Nata de Coco Community Enterprise and a sewing enterprise run by young mothers making graduation gowns. Some enterprises that groups were interested in starting did not necessarily go-ahead. For example, the porters who worked at the local port were interested in starting a trucking business but when they investigated the feasibility of such a business they realised that it was beyond their capacity (Cahill, 2008). Nevertheless, flow-on effects resulted. For example, the skills from the feasibility exercise were transferred to help manage other family-based livelihood activities, and with a new-found sense of his own capacity the President of the porters group accepted a mayoral invitation to join a municipal government committee investigating the training needs of part-time labourers and he also ran for local council election (Cahill, 2008)

In the Atlas Project a range of collective actions resulted, building on the sense of communal subjectivity that emerged through the collaborative mapping process. The fishermen from the small fishing community of Port Clyde, in Maine, organized themselves into the Midcoast Fishermen's Association (MFA) (Snyder and St Martin 2015). Over a twelve-month period, they devised their own version of an area-based fisheries management plan that "exemplified the sense of conservation and community that the [Atlas Project] had discovered among the fishermen of Port Clyde" (MFA 2009, cited in Snyder and St Martin, 2015, 35). This plan, which had fishermen catching fewer fish, focused on conserving fish stock while providing the fishermen with viable livelihoods. The plan informed what became known as the Area Management Coalition (AMC) involving fishermen, academics and sustainability advocates (Snyder and St Martin, 2015; St Martin and Hall-Arber, 2007). The AMC then put a proposal to the New England Fisheries Management Council, based on the MFA's plan, for an alternative to the quota-based system that was being considered at the time. This proposal was rejected in part because the AMC proposal (and MFA plan) used finer-scale mapping than the Council was using (and so fish stocks and fishing practices could not be accounted for) (Snyder and St Martin, 2015). However, this rejection spurred the groups on to work outside the Council and put their own programs in place. This resulted in the formation of the first Community Supported Fishery, named Port Clyde Fresh Catch. In this version of Community Supported Agriculture, subscribers purchase shares of the catch which are then delivered weekly.¹¹ This Community Supported Fishery approach was taken-up by fishing communities across the US who also wanted to ensure the sustainability of fisheries while securing their livelihoods. Currently almost forty Community Supported Fisheries operate across Canada and the US. A second ongoing action has been the expansion of the MFA, with the organisation becoming the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association with members from along the Maine Coast and a staff of four.

At the time of writing, the Shifting Cultures of Manufacturing Project was still in-progress and the first collective action had just occurred. This was the release of the public declaration on just and sustainable manufacturing in Australia (see Reconfiguring the Enterprise Research Project, 2018). The declaration was signed by the participating

¹¹ For more on Community Supported Agriculture see Cameron 2015.

manufacturers and the research team, and was widely distributed, including to state and Federal members of parliament. This led to a series of meetings with parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to discuss the future of manufacturing in Australia, including how this future could be based around manufacturing in ways that are environmentally sustainable and social and economically just. A more detailed research report will be the next public output and the team plan to also use this as a vehicle to generate more public and policy discussion about manufacturing in Australia.¹²

Conclusion

Action research for diverse economies aims to help create new economic possibilities and is founded on recognising that new languages and shifts in subjectivity are crucial to the change process. In the examples discussed in this chapter, new languages of economy were activated, namely the diverse economies framing of local economic practices in the rural Philippines, the visual mapping language of community fisheries in the northeast of the US and a language of ethical manufacturing in the Australian context. The new insights generated by these languages were accompanied by shifts in subjectivity, especially shifts to more collective forms of subjectivity which then laid the groundwork for collective actions. In the rural Philippines, research participants worked collectively to initiate and run community-based social enterprises, thereby demonstrating the potential for endogenous economic development. Resources to adapt this economic development approach in other contexts are available via the Community Partnering for Local Development website (see <http://www.communitypartnering.info>). In the northeast of the US, fishermen also worked collectively devising novel approaches to area-based fisheries management that would simultaneously protect fishing stock while securing livelihoods of fishermen (and their families and their communities). Their strategies have spread well-beyond the immediate fishing communities to include impacts in other US and Canadian fishing communities. At the time of writing, the Australian manufacturing project was starting to have impacts with the participating manufacturers collectively identifying as contributors to more ethical forms of manufacturing, and with politicians and policy-makers starting to take notice of how the national manufacturing agenda could be reoriented around the development of ethical manufacturing.

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¹² Other outputs at the time of writing include presentation of the invited Roepke Lecture in Economic Geography (see Gibson Graham et al., 2019a and b) and a Hands at Work video (see <https://vimeo.com/3063153030>).

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