Background

Academic knowledge production in the social sciences has been largely a top-down affair. In recent decades, however, methodologies have emerged challenging the traditional approach, on both ethical and epistemic grounds. Varieties of “action research” have aimed to bolster social science’s relevance, deepen its analysis of contextualized knowledge, and strengthen the social impact of academic work. From this nascent tradition of action research, a particular variation emerged, centered on a commitment to reconfiguring who has the power to produce knowledge. Dubbed “participatory action research” (PAR), it is grounded in the co-generation of knowledge to empower democratic action, PAR research can be understood as a way for academics to share control of the knowledge production process with the communities they study, working with people as co-researchers, rather than research subjects. But what might a community-driven research process look like without an academic’s involvement? To what extent can action research unaffiliated with the academy advance the objectives of the PAR approach, and what does this tell us about the importance of the academic’s role in advancing collaborative knowledge for democratic action?

For a suitable test case, we can look to the present-day displacement crisis in Nigeria. In the country’s northeast, the problem is well-documented. Since the start of the conflict with Boko Haram, more than 2 million Nigerians have been displaced\(^1\). This alone places Nigeria near

\(^1\) “IDMC » Nigeria: Multiple Displacement Crises Overshadowed by Boko Haram.”
the top of global displacement figures worldwide\textsuperscript{2}. Less commonly known, however, is the massive forced displacement at the hands of development projects, land grabs, and slum clearing. Amnesty International estimates that around 2 million Nigerians have been lost their homes or livelihoods in this manner since 2000\textsuperscript{3}, creating a development-induced crisis to rival flight from Boko Haram. Drawing on fieldwork I conducted in Port Harcourt and Lagos in summer of 2015, this paper will assess the efforts of nine displaced communities to mobilize, generate local knowledge, and lobby for legal, political, or negotiated remedy.

My own field research was decidedly not a PAR process. While it centered on the contextual knowledge and lived experiences of displaced people, it more resembled Flyvbjerg’s “phronetic social science”\textsuperscript{4} than a process of empowering democratic action through research. The length, depth, and objectives of my academic engagement with the communities did not depart significantly from traditional case study and ethnographic social science methods. In an ideal world, my research would influence debates on displacement and land governance. But the unfortunate reality is, as with much social science scholarship, it is more likely to benefit me professionally than materially help the communities I interviewed. On the other hand, the work of my community partner outside the academy resembles PAR much more closely. The nine communities were assisted by Justice and Empowerment Initiatives, a non-profit operating through the “community legal empowerment” model. The efforts of the nine communities and JEI align with many of the mandates of a PAR process, but depart from it in ways that are instructive for the theory and practice of participatory action research.

\textsuperscript{2} “IDMC: Global Figures.”
\textsuperscript{3} “Nigeria Submission to the National Human Rights Commission’s Public Hearing on Evictions and Demonlitions in Nigeria.”
\textsuperscript{4} Flyvbjerg, Making Social Science Matter.
Displacement, JEI, and Human Rights Activism

The nine communities that formed the basis of this fieldwork faced a variety of displacement circumstances. Three of them, on the rural lands of the Ogoni indigenous group, lost their homes and farmland to a banana plantation project started by a multinational Mexican firm. Government authorities used bribery, along with influence over a powerful local family and several gangs, to coerce property transfer without any compensation. In urban Port Harcourt, the Njemanze and Abonnema Wharf communities were forcibly evicted to make room for an oil tank farm. In the Lagos metropolis, the Badia East and PURA informal settlements were bulldozed to make way for development projects, and the middle-class Atinporomeh community was demolished with hours notice by police forces who decided they wanted the land for a new barracks. Police and military violence, intimidation, and arson were frequently used to render tens of thousands homeless and without livelihoods.

Justice and Empowerment Initiatives began working with these communities, and many others in similar situations, taking up litigation and human rights advocacy on their behalf. Their work quickly involved into something more. JEI’s involvement would shift from litigation to encompass democratic capacity building, centered on a philosophy of “community legal empowerment”. JEI’s current partnership with communities facing displacement in Nigeria aligns with many of the objectives and methods of an academic PAR process.

Principles of PAR: Cogeneration of Knowledge and Right to Research
At the heart of PAR theory and practice is a commitment to the cogeneration of knowledge. This methodological commitment has two major implications, and both are evident in the Nigerian anti-displacement work. First, PAR practitioners argue for the epistemological importance of local knowledge for understanding social phenomenon. As Greenwood and Levin explain: “building from this local knowledge... a cogenerative dialogue begins that can transform the views of both. The dialogue between the two [insider and outsider] perspectives can create a shared sense of locations where practical interventions are possible”. From Greenwood and Levin’s point of view, PAR (particularly, “Southern PAR”) relies on an exchange between the outsider’s knowledge of methods or levers of power with the insider’s expert understanding of the context of the problems they face. In *Making Social Science Matter*, Bent Flyvbjerg questions whether generalizable social theory is valid at all, arguing for the centrality of context and in-depth understanding. Likewise, Greenwood and Levin challenge the purely positivist approach to social science, presenting action research as a method to preserve the complexity of “context-bound” social phenomena.

The second motivation for cogenerated knowledge is ethical. Arjun Appadurai argues that research should be considered a right, calling it “essential to claims for democratic citizenship”. For Appadurai, knowledge production is dominated by elites, subverting democracy and ignoring the lived experience of those on the margins. Likewise, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues for “global cognitive justice”, the end of “epistemicide” and the

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5 Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research.*  
7 Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research.*  
8 Appadurai, “The Right to Research.”
acknowledgment of parallel valid ways of knowing. In Seeing Like a State, James Scott traces how states have erased embedded local knowledge, which he labels as Aristotle’s “metis”, in order to subjugate communities. For PAR practitioners, cogenerating knowledge with communities pushes back against epistemicide, and is grounded in a profound respect for what local people already know.

In the case of the JEI communities, their partnership accomplishes both. There are several generative components to JEI’s work today. First, JEI gathers testimony from communities about their displacement experiences to use in the human rights advocacy process. This early approach may not have been participatory in nature, but it did privilege local knowledge. More recently, the cogenerative approach has moved to the forefront. JEI has trained community members to advance their own agendas through their community paralegal training program. Each is entitled to have one man and one woman trained in legal advocacy and techniques to document their displacement. Following a “train the trainer” model, these community paralegals are then encouraged to train others in their community, and some are formally employed by JEI to lead research and advocacy efforts in their own communities.

Members of these communities have engaged in knowledge generation in four major ways. First, JEI has supported them in constructing their own narratives and cases to present to legislative and judicial bodies. Next, the organization has partnered with communities to form the Nigeria Slum/Informal Settlement Federation. After initial training in organizing from JEI, the Federation has become an alliance of communities who have been displaced or face prospective displacement. Community members run the meetings, developing new

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9 Santos, Another Knowledge Is Possible.
methodologies to document the conditions where they live before and after displacement.

They use survey and interview methodology to document living conditions and assets, creating community profiles. Federation members also use Geographic Information Systems to map the boundaries of their settlements and land. Since many government bodies have denied the very existence of the communities they have razed, these processes of research and documentation have allowed those with insecure land tenure to codify their knowledge and formalize it. These activities have captured the contextual information that would be missed by outsiders (or outright denied by them), and enabled Federation members to advance their own learning agendas in pursuit of their right to research.

**Principles of PAR: Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity, as elaborated by Jurgen Habermas, forms another cornerstone of PAR practice. Stephen Kemmis operationalized Habermas’ concept for PAR practice, explaining that a critical PAR process opens new communicative space, allowing access to the truth that exists *between individual subjectivities*. For the Federation and JEI, this materialized formally through community mediation training. As part of the paralegal training program, JEI offered instruction and role play simulations to train community members as mediators. Typically, mediator training embodies many of the principles of Habermas’s intersubjectivity, and this was no exception. Participants were instructed in creating new communicative space, maintaining neutrality, and coaching parties in a dispute to unearth new areas of agreement beyond their initial positions. This training process did more than simply create space for intersubjectivity, it equipped people facing displacement with the tools to create such spaces themselves.
Meetings of the Nigeria Slum/ Informal Settlement Federation were another clear site of intersubjectivity. Seated around the meeting room in a circle, participants came from a range of circumstances and ethnic groups, including those who had been displaced for years and those who feared that their neighborhood would be next. At the start of each meeting, the facilitator (from one of the communities, not necessarily JEI staff) would check in regarding the first languages of those in attendance, prepared to translate between English, Yoruba, and Igbo as necessary after each speaker. The meetings had a loose agenda and no defined end time, moving flexibly between action items and group discussion. All participants were permitted to stand and speak at any time, provided they weren’t interrupting someone else. As each participant stood to speak, they would first call out “Agbajowo!”, to which the audience would respond “Lafinsoya!”, which together translates to “unity is our strength”.

Though the meetings fell short of full gender parity, about one third of the participants were women, several of whom participated vocally and served as meeting facilitators. Community facilitators used icebreaker exercises to maintain an open atmosphere for dialogue and keep all Federation members engaged. Most importantly, these inter-community dialogues had the clear effect of generating new knowledge, and leaving participants with a different understanding of their circumstances than when they began.

**Principles of PAR: Towards Improved Democratic Capacity**

PAR’s aim of building democratic capacity sets it apart from other action research methodologies. As Greenwood and Levin explain, participatory action research can be a path towards being “an academic on the side of democratization and social justice”\(^\text{10}\). Likewise, JEI’s

\(^{10}\) Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*. 
work with displaced communities in Lagos and Port Harcourt is squarely focused on building
democratic capacity. While some Federation members choose the call-and-answer “Agbajowo-
Lafinsoya” as their introduction, others ask the crowd “Information?”, and are greeted with the
emphatic response “Power!”.  

Through the Federation and JEI partnerships, displaced communities have pressured the
state on several fronts. In Ogoniland, where residents were shot and killed to intimidate them
to concede their land, they have pursued action from the national human rights commission. In
urban Port Harcourt, large scale surveying is underway to document the losses due to
displacement and provide evidence for legal and political advocacy. The former residents of
Atinporomeh in Lagos has successfully lobbied for hearings at the state legislature, where a
commission is investigating the police’s extralegal forced eviction and demolition. Residents of
Badia East successfully pressured for settlement money and the halting of demolitions. When
the government broke their agreement in October of this year, they protested along with
Federation members, earning attention from international news outlets. Finally, as part of their
membership in the Federation, each community has begun a savings group to strengthen their
collective financial position.

Friendly Outsiders and the Academy

JEI’s role in the anti-displacement work in Ogoniland, Port Harcourt, and Lagos is clearly
analogous to the “friendly outsider” in PAR practice. JEI was founded by two American lawyers
with several years of experience in human rights advocacy in Nigeria. But outsider status is
more of a spectrum than a binary. Unlike the academic friendly outsider, with the professional
obligations of the academy, JEI’s founders worked in support of displaced communities full-
time. As one Badia East resident explained, recalling the day of her home’s demolition, “Megan and Andrew were the ones who were there”. JEI is also staffed by Nigerians committed to the legal empowerment for the poor, and they take the lead on many of JEI’s efforts. If the founders are outsiders by country of origin, their level of commitment complicates that designation.

How does a full-time outsider differ from one from the academy, and what does that teach us? JEI’s model reveals a weakness of academic PAR, particularly in international development engagements if the researcher is not permanently located near the community. It seems self-evident that longer and deeper partnerships yield more significant contributions to democratic capacity. The best way to contribute to democratic capacity may not involve the academy at all. At the same time, without a link to academy-sanctioned processes of knowledge production, PAR processes may do little to push back against de Sousa Santos’s “epistemicide”.

The different flavors of PAR-like work flow from the different motivations for engaging in it. If social scientists engage with communities primarily because they want their social science to “matter”, it is more likely to look like Flyvbergian phronesis. Such scholars may leverage some of PAR’s virtues to broaden the impact of their work, or deepen its relevance to a particular context. But for those more concerned with a right to research, or with the democratization of knowledge production, the process looks different. There are certainly “pracademics” who balance scholarly output and a commitment to cogeneration of knowledge, but they remain bound by the rules and expectations of the academy. As a result, academic PAR

remains a way to share control of knowledge generation with communities, not hand it over to them. This form of action research remains merely participatory, and stops short of the outputs being truly community-controlled.

But PAR need not be solely the realm of university researchers. JEI’s work in Nigeria demonstrates the power of practitioners to partner with communities to answer the questions they care about. Depending on the researcher, academic PAR practice runs the risk of being more about changing the academy than changing the world. By asking “What might this project look like if I didn’t have to publish on it?”, academic PAR researchers can test their process for genuine commitment. JEI’s experience demonstrates that from the perspective of a partner community, the success of a PAR project is not about the kind of institution the outsider is from, but the extent to which the process equips them to actualize their own right to research for social change.


Medeiros, Anthony. Personal Interviews in Lagos and Port Harcourt, Nigeria. August 2015.
