# Analysis of action research possibilities with PhD fellows on sustainable palm oil

**Dieuwke Klaver**

## Inventory

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This analysis of possibilities for action research is based upon preliminary research proposals of 8 PhD candidates. It is part of the INREF research programme:  SUSPENSE (SUStainable Palmoil = ENvironmentally Sustainable and Equitable) 2012-2016.

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# 1 Introduction

This inventory or possibilities for action research, based upon de research proposals of 4 PhD candidates, is part of the INREF research programme 'SUSPENSE (SUStainable Palmoil = ENvironmentally Sustainable and Equitable) 2012-2016. Centre for Development Innovation (CDI), Wageningen UR received KB funding in 2013 in order to:

- Advise the researchers on possibilities for combining fundamental research with action oriented research and on engaging with stakeholders in a meaningful way.
- Conduct action – oriented research together with researchers to analyse and improve governance mechanisms and standards in the 'glocal' palm oil sector.
- Support researchers to make research findings accessible for stakeholders so that these can take appropriate action.

The current review presents an inventory of ideas for action research, generated with 4 PhD candidates in the INREF programme. These proposals are:

1. Strategies of Indonesian state actors in governance of sustainable palm oil, Indonesia,
2. Intensification, Replanting and Certification on Indonesian oil palm smallholders,
3. Environmental governance arrangements in Thailand,
4. Role of buyers of crude palm oil in making sustainable palm oil mainstream in Indonesia.

Four other candidates were offered the possibility to discuss action research elements in their proposals but did not use this opportunity.

# 2    Action research – What is it?

Reason P. and Bradbury H. (2008) describe action research as "a set of practices that responds to people's desire to act creatively in the face of practical and often pressing issues in their lives in organisations and communities". It:

- Calls for the engagement with people in collaborative relationships, opening new 'communicative spaces' in which dialogue and development can flourish.
- Draws on many ways of knowing, both in the evidence that is generated in inquiry and its expression in diverse forms of presentation as we share learning with wider audiences.
- Is values oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate.
- Is a living emergent process that cannot be predetermined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively?

They define action research *as a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.*

Some of the most frequently mentioned key approaches of action research are presented in table 1. Huntjens et al (2010) mention additional approaches such as co-operative inquiry to emphasise an approach in which the researchers and practitioners play equal roles as co-researchers, as well as learning evaluation which refers to developmental evaluation practices developed by Michael Quinn Patton. On the other hand the distinction between action science and action learning, are heavily debated according to Reason and Bradbury (2008).

| Table 1: Key approaches in action research | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | **Starting point, paradigm, grounding?** | **Aims** | **Role researcher** |
| Participatory Action research | All knowledge claims are political in their implications and oppressed groups need to be made aware of actors, factors that cause inequality. | Empower or emancipate marginalised, oppressed groups and liberation from oppression. | Change agent and identification with the marginalized, oppressed groups. |
| Action Science | Practitioners use theories (intended actions) with regards of how change happens and act accordingly. | Make theories of action explicit in order to critically and jointly assess what works and what not for increased effectiveness. | Facilitate learning, triple loop learning and sense making in order to co-create actionable knowledge. |
| Appreciative inquiry | Human systems move in the direction of what they study, are committed to inquiry and intrinsic motivation is the source for change. | Plan actions based upon past successes and best practices that generated a lot of positive energy and enthusiasm. | Asking unconditional positive questions to generate motivation and energy. |
| Action Learning | Problems are to be solved by problem owners and not by researchers. | Learn practitioners to solve their own problems. | Facilitate learning by asking open and non-oriented questions. |

*Sources:* Reason P and Bradbury H (2008); Huntjens, P., Termeer, C, Eshuis, J., Van Buuren, M.W. (2011)

Other dimensions that are important in action research are the degree of participation or engagement of 'the researched' with the researcher as well as at what level inquiry takes place. In line with the levels of participation of Jules Pretty (1995), the participation by 'the researched' can vary from manipulative (participation as a pretence) and passive participation (people being told what to do) to interactive participation (in joint analysis, development of action plans and implementation) and self-mobilisation (taking initiative independently from the researcher). Their role changes in consequence from being 'the researched' into that of a 'co-researcher'. The level of inquiry dimension distinguishes between the ability of the researcher him/herself to foster an inquiring approach (first person), the ability to inquire face-to-face with others based upon interpersonal dialogue and the development of communities (of practice and dialogue) (second person) and our ability to create a wider impact beyond those with whom we engage face-to-face (third person (Reason P and Bradbury H, 2008).

In conclusion, important issues to consider when planning for action research are:

- To what extent is the research trying to solve pressing issues of the actors involved in the palm oil sector?
- What type of change in society, policies, and practice does the (action) research contribute to this?
- Who will participate and at what degree?
- How does the (action) research take into account power relations in society, including the position that the researcher takes (identification with marginalised / oppressed groups?)
- How does learning in both society and in the academic world take place, in other words, what type of knowledge is being generated?

The discussions with the four PhD researchers took these issues into account, as well as issues related to their personal interest and possibilities.

# 3  Ideas developed with PhD candidates

Four PhD candidates showed personal interest in incorporating action research elements in their research proposal[1]. Annexe 1 provides an overview of their research proposals, including an identification of action research entry points.

## 3.1  Strategies of Indonesian state actors in governance of sustainable palm oil, Indonesia.

This research proposal focusses on the Indonesian Banking sector and the Indonesian Government. At the moment of the interview, there was no final research proposal that explains the research topic and approach. However it will focus on the role of the Indonesian government in making the palm oil sector more sustainable with a particular emphasis on the financial sector. In a previous draft the action research aims at improving the government's practice towards a sustainable palm oil sector. The dominating research methodology is that of an interpretative approach using mostly in-depth interviews.

The PhD fellow is working with the Development Forum on Strategic and Sustainable Palm oil plantations (FP2SB) on improving the investment policies and practices of the financial sector. Therefore his action research aim is to convince the government of Indonesia to enforce existing rules and regulations in the banking sector, in particular that of the central bank. In turn, the government and the central bank will influence the banking sector. In terms of action research two possibilities were discussed:

- With FP2SB an inventory of best practices in the banking sector will be made and a policy brief will be produced. This will serve as an entry point to engage with the financial sector and the government on improving lending and investment practices in line with existing rules and regulations and identifying changes in rules and regulations needed. This policy brief could be produced early 2014, followed by discussions with the government and the banking.
- An alternative proposal consists of applying the Dutch Fair Banking procedure developed by Dutch NGOs to rate Dutch banks with regard to investment policies and practices, http://www.eerlijkebankwijzer.nl/english/. This would require in-depth research of investment practices within the sector, that than would be discussed with the government, the central bank and the financial sector as a starting point for change. In the Netherlands such scores would be published in order to increase consumer pressure, but this might be in appropriate in the Indonesian context.

## 3.2  Intensification, Replanting and Certification on Indonesian oil palm smallholders

This research proposal aims at understanding how smallholders can improve their management practices for sustainable palm oil production given their diversity in agricultural practices, resources, and constraints. An underlying assumption is that intensification and replantation of oil palm will decrease rural households' strategies to expand the surface under palm oil. The dominant research approach is partly analytical, partly empirical, using econometric models to analyse questionnaires as well as collecting qualitative information. Action research as an approach is not explicitly mentioned, apart from a number of

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[1] The PhD proposals are draft proposals that were not yet submitted to the research schools in charge of assessing their quality.

workshops that aim to strengthen farmer's capacities in terms of organisational capacity (producer organisation), best management practices at farm level, microfinance and certification, followed by a workshop in 2016 on future strategies for the palm oil sector.

The researcher is working at the University of Riau, where staff performance is evaluated not only in terms of publications and lecturing time, but also in terms of efforts to engage actors outside the university into development efforts. This is part of the Universities Corporate Social Responsibility policy. Apart from addressing the yield gap and certification issues for smallholders, this researcher aims to start discussions with different stakeholders in one district in Riau to identify other pathways that prevent or stop the extensification of palm oil production. Actors that could play an important role in these discussions are:

– Wahli (with Friends of the Earth).
– University staff and students
– Solidaridad who is operational in the nearby province Jambi.
– World Wildlife Fund who is already working with the University and with Wageningen University
– Farmers organised and/or non-organised.

Riau University organises two events per year with actors outside university which could be used as an opportunity to plan next steps in the process of preventing or stopping the encroachment of forests and find alternative solutions.

Possible steps could be as follows:

– Identify key actors in the palm oil sector and approach them if they are interested in becoming part of a taskforce to identify sustainable palm oil pathways that prevent encroachment. This could be done by means of conducting open semi-structured interviews by students of the University.
– Organise a first event with all actors that would identify most important factors that contribute (positively or negatively) to encroachment of forests. Depending upon the duration of the event, a first agenda for action, though modest could be identified.
– Follow-up interviews with actors or groups of actors involved to encourage them to take action, to further develop proposals for action in smaller groups etc.
– Organise a second event with all stakeholders to evaluate progress made with regards to the agenda for action and to further develop the action agenda and concrete actions to be undertaken.
– Etc.

Students could help to further analyse the ideas proposed by the actors or actions in which they engage in order to decrease the encroachment of forests. They could evaluate underlying assumptions.

## 3.3    Environmental governance arrangements in Thailand.

This research aims to analyse how state and non-state actors in the palm oil sector influence the adoption of certification schemes by smallholders. Different components focus on smallholders, private sector actors, formal rules and regulations and the policy effectiveness of the Thai government in terms of introducing certification schemes. The research approach is empirical with regards to the smallholder question and more interpretative for the other three components. Most important methods used are semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, literature review.

The research component at the smallholder level will include an action-research element which entails in-depth interviews with leaders of smallholder organisations followed by a questionnaire.

Suggestions made for the action research component are as follows:

– Include some more open questions that enable leaders of the smallholder organisations to also give their opinion about factors beyond the farm household, such as factors in the value chain (with the mill), or with government services or policies or project organisations that are influencing their decision to opt for certification of their plantation or not. This information will then be used to design the questionnaire for quantitative analysis.
– Organise a meeting with actors in the chain and those that provide the enabling environment (government officials, NGOs) to present the findings of the interviews and questionnaires, followed by a reflection on what a sustainable and inclusive palm oil sector in the South of Thailand would look like and identify actions and commitments needed to realise that desirable situation.
– Convey another meeting with the same actors after some time and present new research findings and reflect on what happened with actions and commitments made by actors after the first session. Such questions may help the actors another time to start to take action.
– Etc.

## 3.4 Role of buyers of crude palm oil in making sustainable palm oil mainstream in Indonesia.

This proposal aims at answering the two following research questions

– How are decisions of palm oil buyers in (not) sourcing and selling certified palm oil affected by actors within and outside the value chain?
– How do these decisions constrain or enable the mainstreaming of sustainable palm oil through the palm oil value chain?

The proposal has 4 distinct components, starting with a description of the value chain including the position of Certified Palm Oil buyers, towards including other actors inside and outside the value chain in order to identify factors that influence the decisions made by Certified Palm Oil buyers and finally constructing a theory based upon the case study approach. The research approach is inductive in nature based upon the empirical description of cases.

Action research will focus on the generation of insights on how actors within the value chain and those outside the value chain affect decision making by buyers with respect to their sourcing and selling strategies of palm oil. This will be done by means of consultations with key actors, in particular the palm oil buyers.

This research proposal would become more action-oriented if, apart from collecting information from the actors (participation by information giving), the actors would be more actively engaged in making the sector more sustainable. This could possibly be realised by the following steps.

– Have exploratory - open ended interviews with all actors inside and outside the value chain - in order to:
  - Identify who are most important actors/factors to influence palm oil buyers' decisions on sustainability.
  - Explore with these actors what a sustainable palm oil sector would look like
  - Explore with these actors what needs to be done to reach this ideal situation.
  - Identify what each actor can do him/herself.

– Write a policy brief that presents the results of all these different perspectives on sustainability issues and including the first steps to take action and disseminate this amongst the actors for validation.
– Organise a meeting with the actors to discuss the policy brief. If at that meeting the actors express a sense of urgency to do something about their sustainability concerns, the organisation of a multi-stakeholder process may become feasible.

# 4    Discussion of proposals and ideas

## *To what extent is the research trying to solve pressing issues of the actors involved in the palm oil sector?*

All PhD researchers are knowledgeable about the most important issues in the palm oil sector and have working experience in the sector. However most may have prepared their research proposal in Wageningen without consultation of actors in the sector. The success rate of the action research will depend upon the interest that actors will have in solving the issues at stake. The researchers will need to invest time with all actors that are likely to be involved in the action research in order to mobilise them and convince them that participation may be beneficial for each actor individually but also for the entire sector.

## *Who will participate and at what degree?*

In the initial research proposals the participation level is limited to that of actors giving information to the researcher. No activities are included to present intermediate research findings to groups of actors or to get their ideas on sustainable pathways in the palm oil sector.

In three of the four advices given with regard to action research, an activity is foreseen during which the researcher will present intermediate research findings that will help to engage further with the sector. It is suggested that

- A briefing paper is produced with regards to (best) investment practices in the banking sector.
- Organise a meeting with actors in the chain and those that provide the enabling environment (government officials, NGOs) to present the findings related to factors that influence the adoption of certification schemes by small producers.
- Present a policy brief that highlights how palm oil buyers decide about palm oil sourcing and selling strategies and how these decisions could contribute towards making the sector more sustainable.

Only in the case of intensification of palm oil production, such an activity was not foreseen and a suggestion was made to start with a multi-sector approach.

## *What type of change in society, policies, and practice does the (action) research contribute to this?*

Because the level of participation of key stakeholders is very low in the initial research proposals, the likelihood that the research contributes to (positive) change in the palm oil sector is not evident.
With the advice given (and if followed up), some change might be expected. In Indonesia, the government and the central bank, followed by the rest of the financial sector might work towards the enforcement of investment policies for a more sustainable palm oil sector. Together with other actors, some (very modest) solutions may be found through a multi-stakeholder effort to slow down forest encroachment for palm oil production. Palm oil buyers may become more aware and find alternative sourcing and selling strategies to make the sector more sustainable through discussions with other actors. In Thailand, some change could happen in terms of increased adoption rates for certification schemes.

## *How does the (action) research take into account power relations in society, including the position that the researcher takes (identification with marginalised / oppressed groups?)*

Most initial research proposals do not mention power relations in society and how this might influence research findings. One proposal will explicitly work with political economy theories and hence try to address power relations.

Power relations and the interests at stake are very important elements to take into consideration when aiming for change in the palm oil sector.

*How does learning in both society and in the academic world take place? In other words, what type of knowledge is being generated?*

Apart from mentioning the relevance of the research proposal for the academic world and society, each proposal presents a research plan that specifies the research steps and the expected outputs, ie academic knowledge in the form of articles or dissertations. A reflection on who will read those products and how reading will contribute to societal change is not being discussed. In order to make the research proposal action and learning oriented at societal level it is suggested that each research plan includes a plan for stakeholder engagement, including the specific outputs to be expected at each step. For those who are not including action research as a process for data collection and societal change, this would mean a discussion on how dissertations and academic articles will change social practice. For those who intend to include action research a plan that specifies the expected outputs for each step in terms of type of practical knowledge generated would be recommended.

*Other criteria important to take into consideration*

During the discussions another element in favour of doing action research was identified which is related to the working situation of the research candidate, his/her network in the palm oil sector. One researcher has a particular background in the financial sector and in the NGO world, making it easier to connect his PhD towards engendering changes in society. Another is working at a University with a specific outreach mandate.

Another important criterion to take into consideration during implementation of action research is related to the capacities of the PhD researchers to assume the role of 'facilitator of change and learning' which requires additional competencies. This capacity has not been assessed during this inventory.

# 5     Conclusions and recommendations

The findings in the previous chapter show that the four research candidates have made efforts to include action research elements in their research proposal. Tensions exist however in combining both the 'fundamental' research requirements of a PhD fellow with action research requirements, such as starting with issues identified and experienced by actors in the palm oil sector. The four PhD researchers showed their personal motivation to work on the action research component. With CDI, the most important features of action research (level of participation, power relations, change in society, and types of knowledge generated) where discussed and suggestions for action research were made.

It is not known to what extent these suggestions have been incorporated in the final research plan and to what extent they will be implemented. Further coaching by CDI is therefore necessary to bring these intentions into practice.

For future PhD researchers who aim to include action research in their proposal, it is recommended that they reflect upon the above mentioned features and that they integrate the action research component into their research plan.

# 6    Next steps to be considered by CDI

The three objectives of the KB funding for CDI's contribution to the INREF research programme are:

– Advise the researchers on possibilities for combining fundamental research with action oriented research and on engaging with stakeholders in a meaningful way.
– Conduct action – oriented research together with researchers to analyse and improve governance mechanisms and standards in the glocal palm oil sector.
– Support researchers to make research findings accessible for stakeholders so that these can take appropriate action.

Based upon the research proposals discussed with CDI, the basis for providing added value in the field of action research by the PhD researchers is very limited and dependent upon their implementation capacity. Each of the four research proposals has its own entry point for doing action research on a particular issue, and an overall (action) research topic that relates all research programmes together has not been identified. All draft research proposals show that interdisciplinary work is ensured at PhD level, but that action research is not yet very well integrated.

In the light of the aforementioned it was concluded that CDI will concentrate on the following in the coming period:

1. Still provide individual support to those that want to engage in action research. This will be done during the annual meeting in February 2014 in Indonesia.
2. To follow up on two other PhD researchers who intend to work on sustainable pathways. This will be done during the annual meeting in February 2014 in Indonesia.
3. Develop an own action research proposal at the programme level. An entry point for such a proposal is the observation that the PhD proposals do not focus on global level issues, or on the governance arrangements between global and national levels. Action research aimed at bringing key stakeholders from global – private governance entities as the RSPO together with key stakeholders in charge of the governance of the palm oil sector in sovereign countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand would be very innovative and provide a real challenge.

# 7    Resources consulted

- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2008), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. Participatory Inquiry and Practice. 2nd Edition. London, SAGE Publications.
- Huntjens, P., Termeer, C, Eshuis, J., Van Buuren, M.W. (2011), *Collaborative action research for the governance of climate adaptation - foundations, conditions and pitfalls.* Key Deliverable 1A, Theme 7: Governance of adaptation. Dutch National Research Programme Knowledge for Climate, 2011.
- Pretty, J. (1995), *Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture*, World Development, 23 (8), 1247–1263.
- PhD proposals of the 4 PhD candidates that are interested in developing an action research component.

# Appendix 1 – Inventory of first drafts research proposals

| | Indonesian state actors | Intensification of palm oil | Governance arrangements | Role of palm oil buyers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Research questions related to action research** | What are the challenges of the state in directing the capital flows for a sustainable palm oil sector that is government led, whilst ensuring interactions with the financial and industrial sector. | No research questions related to action research. The overall question is; How do smallholder plantation farmers improve their management practices to produce oil palm sustainably given their diversity in agricultural practices, resources, and constraints. | To what extent and what factors influence decisions by smallholders in the palm oil sector regarding the adoption of certification schemes. | How are different actors within and outside the palm oil value chain influencing the definitions of sustainability of CPO buyers and their decisions in (not) sourcing and selling certified sustainable palm oil? |
| **Position of action research component** | Final research proposal not available. | An underlying assumption is that increased yields will prevent forest encroachment for palm oil production. | The action research question is targeting smallholders; the others are focusing on other private sector organisations in the value chain, the institutional context (rules and regulations) and the effectiveness of Thai policies. | Two out of four steps are meant to use an action research approach. The first step is meant to describe the palm oil value chain and the last past step intends to build the theory. |
| **Research steps/methods** | Final research proposal not available. | 1. Inventory of challenges at farm level.<br>2. Palm oil production analysis.<br>3. Cost-benefit analysis.<br>4. Analysis of reasons of smallholders for applying BMP.<br>5. Value chain analysis. | 1. In-depth semi structured interviews with leaders of smallholders.<br>2. Based upon qualitative findings, design quantitative questionnaire and analyse findings in a statistical way.<br>3. Organise a workshop to discuss strategies for increased adoption of certification schemes. | 1. Review of environmental system applications.<br>2. Participant observation.<br>3. Consulting with CPO buyers' firms regarding defining, sourcing and selling.<br>4. Interviews with key persons that source and sell from Indonesian CPO buyers and other actors outside the value chain.<br>5. Document review. |
| **Nature of action research component as mentioned in proposal** | Apparently there was no action research component in the final proposal. | The research proposal does not propose action research elements. | At the level of the smallholders and aiming at increased adoption of certification schemes. | Consultation of CPOs is mentioned as an action research component, aiming at influencing decision making in favour of purchase of certified palm oil. |
| **Observations** | No final research proposal available. | | | No final research proposal available. |

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