Tool 2.3: Participatory Action Research (PAR) Menu of Methods

Surveys – Surveys ask specific questions and tend to include short answer, multiple-choice, and scaled-answer questions. Surveys can be done online, through the mail, and can be written and filled out in person. The most effective way to conduct surveys in support of organizing is in an in person "interview style" so that the surveyor can make personal connections with the respondent. Surveys are helpful for getting information or data from a wider group of people and are better for getting quantitative information like numbers, than they are for getting qualitative information, like people's stories. Surveys can be helpful when making policy demands because elected officials, policymakers and the media tend to respond to hard numbers.

Interviews – Interviews are guided conversations about a specific topic, are often done one-on-one, and tend to use open-ended questions in order to get in-depth explanations. Interviews are useful when you want to get more specific, detailed information than you would get from a survey and you want to get deeper into people's experiences and personal stories. Interviews are appropriate when dealing with sensitive or personal information that people may not be comfortable writing on a survey or sharing in a group setting (such as a focus group). Interviews can also assist the organizing outreach process because they facilitate one-to-one interaction, but they can be more time intensive then surveys.

Focus Groups – Are small group sessions (7-12 people) that are led by a facilitator in order to obtain opinions based on the research question. Like interviews, focus groups are good for getting qualitative data, and are an effective way to get people's personal stories, testimonies, and experiences from a group setting. They can also be useful for delving deeper into a specific issue or research question not fully addressed by another method. Focus groups can be useful in allowing participants to bounce ideas and stories off of each other. Due to the group setting, they can also be more challenging than interviews for discussing sensitive topics.

Community Mapping/Canvassing – Is a process of documenting and visually presenting trends or patterns in a given community. Community maps and canvassing can be used to document many physical, spatial dynamics of a neighborhood from new construction sites, to new luxury condos, to green spaces, to new businesses, to vacant lots, etc. This is an effective tool for tracking physical changes in a neighborhood, and specifically as a way to document the impact of gentrification on a neighborhood.

Community Visioning – Is a process where group of community members come together to develop an alternative vision or proposal for the future of their community. Visioning can be used to develop public policy demands and can be particularly useful when communities are working to impact the physical development of their community. This can also be useful for groups working to influence a particular issue or policy.

Mystery Shopping— Is a process where community members posing as customers call or visit businesses and document their experience and observations. Usually mystery shoppers have a specific set of criteria they are looking for when they visit or call a business. This is a good way to document employment practices, compliance with labor laws, and consumer fraud.

Secondary Data – Is data that comes from someone else's research. This is distinct from "primary data" which is original data that you collect through your own research in the field. Secondary data is helpful for getting background information that will complement the ground-level information that comes from people's experiences (primary data). It can also be helpful to do a bit of secondary data collection before you begin your primary data collection in order to focus your research questions and help you to develop your research instruments (such as surveys and interview guides). Secondary data can come from a variety of public and private sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, city and state agencies, research organizations and academic institutions.

Media Review – A systematic review of a certain number of news articles or clips from a variety of sources about a specific topic to uncover the most common words or themes that emerge. This can be used as background research to help inform your research design and can also be used on its own to give you data about how a specific issue is being presented or framed in the media.

Literature Review – This is a review of existing articles, academic studies or reports in order to find out what information already exists about the topic you are exploring. This can be part of your secondary research; can help inform your research questions and can help you identify gaps in research and information on a given issue.