

# Research and civil society in development interventions

---

*Jacob Thorsen, September 2021*

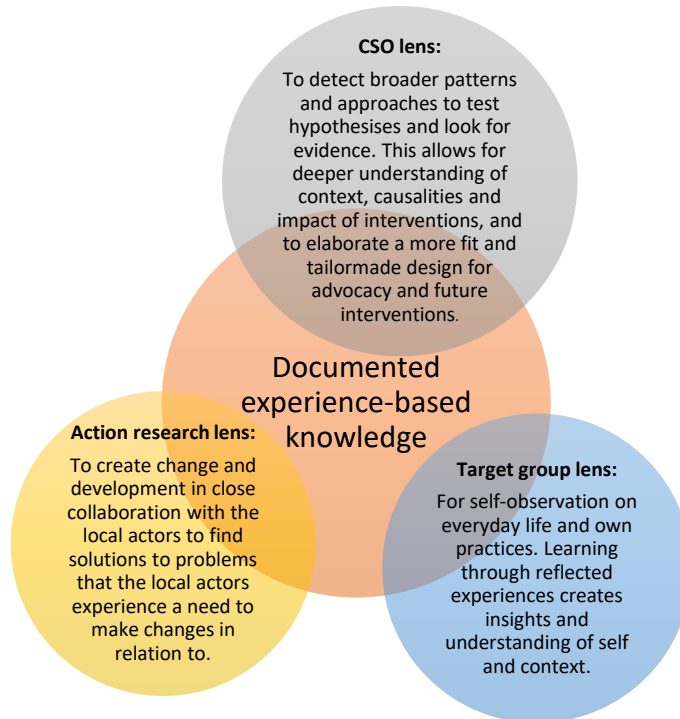
## Introduction

The '*good documentation*' in development interventions is essential in many ways. On the one hand, it is required by donors like CISU in relation to monitoring and reporting on projects and programmes, and CSOs can apply various M&E tools for both learning and documentation to better optimize and adjust interventions. In addition, we know that documented experience-based knowledge has far greater impact on the target group; it is perceived as more 'real'. The good documentation and documented experience-based knowledge gives greater legitimacy in interventions, both in relation to advocacy efforts based on facts and documented stories, cases, and experiences, but also to open doors to local, national, and international authorities and decision makers in relation to, for example, preventive work, policy development and updating procedures and practices of authorities, participation in expert groups, etc.

*Ground-truthing* where processed experience-based knowledge returns to target group for verification and further interpretation, provides ownership and greater impact. Processed experience-based knowledge creates a mirror for own reflection on everyday life and practices, and the target group itself becomes the solution to the problem, as learning through reflected experiences creates insights and understanding of self and context.

Documented experience-based knowledge is the lens of both self-observation on everyday life and own practices, but also for observers to detect broader patterns and approaches to test hypotheses and look for evidence. This allows for CSOs to learn and develop their organisational capacity, and have a deeper understanding of context, causalities, and impact of interventions, and to elaborate a more fit and tailor-made design for advocacy and future interventions. Among development practitioners, researchers and universities, the direct working with target groups is referred to as *action research*. Action research is conducted 'in the middle of society' and aims to create change or development in close collaboration with the local actors, and to find solutions to problems that the local actors experience a need to make changes in relation to. Thus, action research clearly differs from classical positivist research, where the researcher 'like a fly on the wall' strives to influence as little as possible to create objective and secure knowledge. Today, action research deals with broader perspectives on sustainability, participation, involvement, dialogue, and democracy.

## Lenses how to perceive and apply documented experience-based knowledge



We can thus summarize that there is a broad interest in ‘the good documentation’ in development interventions, and the question is how we as different actors together can pursue and apply documented evidence-based knowledge for its multiple possible purposes, both to pursue individual institutional interests, but also to identify broader agendas and benefits in generating common knowledge to achieve a greater and broader overall understanding, both within specific themes and methodological approaches, but also to seek answers to broader questions on e.g. the effects of development assistance, as joint resources and disciplines together can be brought into play. The possibilities are many and seemingly mutually enriching for those involved.

## CISU role and position

The good documentation is a requirement in CISU funded interventions, as the application must include a plan for monitoring. The documentation of experiences constitutes one of the assessment criteria in applications, and in the budget, it is possible to allocate funds for monitoring and evaluation.

For organisations with a keen interest in linking project interventions with research initiatives, the following are offered and facilitated by CISU:

- Counselling members on opportunities for linking M&E with research.
- Network with universities and researchers (knowledge sharing).
- Funding if the following principles are addressed (knowledge production):
  - Thematically directly relevant to the project's advocacy strategy.
  - Building on participatory principles and the inclusion of rights holders as far as possible.
  - Building up local capacity to do action research (either partner or locally based institutions).
  - Is budgetarily proportional in relation to other activities of the strategy (may not be the sole purpose of UI and MI, but perhaps of SI).
  - The application format 'plan for collection of experiences must encompass action research as design.
  - Budget cannot fund expenses that otherwise could be funded by ordinary Danish development research funds (but can be complementary ???)
  - Ground-truthing - generated and processed data must be returned to the target group