amphibious research

Action Research in a Multimedia World

César Rodríguez-Garavito

Dejusticia Series

AMPHIBIOUS RESEARCH

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Rodríguez-Garavito César

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Introduction

To do action research is to lead a double life. It is to experience, in a matter of hours, the transition from the introverted world of the classroom to the extroverted world of the media and meetings with activists and public officials. The contrast can be felt on the skin: the humidity and heat of fieldwork is a far cry from the climate-controlled air of university offices, courthouses, and philanthropic foundations.

The contrast is even more marked when practicing action research in highly dangerous and unequal contexts, such as those that I have visited in the course of an action-research project about the socioenvironmental conflicts that have exploded throughout the globe over the last fifteen years, as one country after another has turned toward natural resource exploitation to satisfy a growing global demand for minerals, oil, and energy.

Elsewhere, I have used the term "minefields" to refer to these sites and the spheres of social interaction produced within them (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011). They are minefields in both a sociological sense and an economic sense. In sociological terms, they are true social *fields* (Bourdieu 1977), characteristic of enclave economies in the extractive sector, and therefore typified by profoundly unequal power relations between mining companies and local communities, as well as a

scarce state presence. They are *mine*fields in that they are highly dangerous: any misstep within these fields, which are characterized by violent and distrustful social interactions, can be fatal. They are also minefields in an economic sense. On many occasions, they revolve around the exploitation of gold, silver, coltan, or other valuable minerals.

In other cases, as in several natural resource exploitation projects in Colombia that I have studied, they are minefields in a more literal sense as well: the territories in conflict are littered with antipersonnel mines, sown by leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries as a strategy of war and territorial control.

In this short book, I reflect on the nature and challenges of action research based on my experience of practicing it in these minefields. Specifically, I draw on three case studies regarding socioenvironmental conflicts in indigenous territories that have received national and international attention: the dispute over the construction of the Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian Amazon, the conflict over oil drilling in the territory of the Sarayaku indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and the struggle surrounding the construction of the Urrá dam in northern Colombia.

The text is divided into three sections. In the first, I characterize the practice of action research within these contexts, highlighting what I consider to be its four main scientific and political strengths. In the second, I explore the dilemmas facing action research, outlining the four challenges that represent the flipsides of the strengths mentioned in the first part. I close the book with a proposal to solve some of these dilemmas, through strategies that form an approach that I refer to as "amphibious

research"—research that allows the action researcher to breathe simultaneously in the two very different worlds of academia and the public sphere, and to synthesize her two lives into one without drowning in the process. In making the case for amphibious research, I highlight the need to widen the types of writing and forms of diffusion of human rights work in order to take advantage of a world that is increasingly multimedia.

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The Action-Research Windmill

One of the best characterizations of the practice of action research is the beautiful article by Michael Burawoy (2010) about Edward Webster, the renowned South African labor sociologist who founded the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) of the University of the Witwatersrand. Burawoy uses the metaphor of a windmill to describe a typical day in the life of Webster. Like a windmill, Webster, a public sociologist and action researcher, is in constant movement, propelled by the many blades that constitute his professional activity: research and teaching, participation in the public sphere (the media, social movements, and so on), public policy advocacy, and the construction of institutions that embody and promote action research, such as think tanks and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The rotation and interconnectedness of these four blades causes the sociological imagination to transform into political imagination, in the same way that the relentless turning of a windmill converts air into energy.

This South African windmill resonated thousands of miles away, in the heart of the Amazon, during my empirical work on minefields. I had been propelled there by the forces of various blades that led me from academic research and public debate on indigenous rights

in Colombia to human rights advocacy in Washington and, from there, to new rounds of research and activism in Brazil and Ecuador. All of these activities formed part of the consolidation process for two institutions I helped found: the Center for the Study of Law, Justice and Society (Dejusticia, a research center and NGO) and the Global Justice and Human Rights Program at the University of Los Andes (a university-based legal clinic), both in Bogotá, Colombia.

I started the project with a study on the Urrá dam, located in northern Colombia, the birthplace of the country's blood-soaked paramilitary movement and the site of violent disputes over territorial control and drug trafficking between the paramilitaries—working in shady alliances with Colombia's armed forces and political elite—and the equally violent leftist guerrillas,

MAP

Indigenous peoples and socioenvironmental conflicts: Mapping amphibious research

particularly the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (see map). Caught in the crossfire are the indigenous Embera-Katío people, who have lost at least twenty-one leaders through assassinations by one side or another. And today—after twenty-five years of forced displacement and human and environmental loss caused by the construction of the Urrá dam—the Embera-Katío people face the very real threat of cultural and physical extinction (Rodríguez-Garavito and Orduz 2012).

Even though I arrived in Urrá with the intention of documenting what had happened over those two decades—and in that sense, donning my professional sociologist hat—from the very beginning, the research project had a component of action. In fact, I had learned about the Urrá case during a collaborative effort with the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, when I had been donning my other professional hat (as a lawyer) to advise the organization on legal strategies for defending indigenous territories and livelihoods. Thus, on my first trip to Urrá, I was accompanied by students from the Program on Global Justice and Human Rights at the University of Los Andes with the goal of helping the Embera-Katío community explore the legal options available to defend their rights.

I still remember vividly my arrival to Urrá. Before the unusual sight of a group of professors and students in one of the most violent regions in one of the world's most violent countries, the military personnel who jealously guarded the entrance greeted us with distrustful questions—"Who are you?" "What are you doing here?" Once we passed the checkpoint, the reasons for the distrust became clear. As we traveled down the river

that fed into the reservoir, we saw navy speedboats playing cat and mouse with the illegal boats transporting cocaine produced on the slopes of the river.

Allowing myself to go with the unpredictable flow of action research, I arrived at the second stop in the project: the Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian Amazon. The action-research project on the Urrá dam had led to my involvement in the legal defense of other indigenous communities who, like the Embera-Katío, had not been consulted prior to the construction of development projects in their territories, despite the fact that practically every Latin American country has ratified Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which establishes the obligation to conduct prior consultations. While at a public hearing on this topic before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2010, I learned that the commission had just received a complaint regarding a case similar to Urrá. This complaint, submitted by indigenous communities and environmental organizations, accused the Brazilian government of having failed to consult Amazonian indigenous communities before authorizing the construction of Belo Monte, slated to be the third largest dam in the world. The case immediately attracted international attention given that, on the one hand, the Brazilian government had declared the dam to be of national interest as part of the country's plans to become an economic superpower and, on the other, international celebrities (such as Sting and James Cameron) had traveled to the region to express their solidarity with the indigenous peoples. When the Brazilian government refused to obey the Inter-American Commission's order to suspend the dam's construction while the commission

reviewed the complaint, various human rights organizations and scholars—myself among them—traveled to the region to document the situation and express our condemnation of the government's decision.

Having been involved in the Urrá case as an academic researcher and in Belo Monte as a lawyer, my comparative-sociologist intuition led me to look for a third case of legal and political mobilization that, unlike the previous two, had ended with a favorable judicial decision for the indigenous communities. The opportunity to complete the study sample arose in mid-2012, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held a hearing in the territory of the Sarayaku people in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which foretold a decision in favor of the indigenous community. When I traveled to the Sarayaku territory for fieldwork, the community and their lawyers were eagerly awaiting the court's decision, which was published a day after my visit ended. In a historic decision, the Inter-American Court ordered Ecuador to provide compensation to the indigenous community for having authorized oil exploration without first consulting them, and to conduct such a consultation should Ecuador consider oil exploration within Sarayaku territory in the future.

With this case study, my journey had reflected a complete rotation of the windmill: from the research of a professional social scientist to intervention in the courts and media as a human rights lawyer, including participation in debates on indigenous rights in each of the three countries, and ending again with the professional social scientist. As tends to happen, today, several years into the project, I am certain of neither my identity nor my precise role in the story. I have been all roles

at once and none in particular. Nor do I know when my involvement will end; unlike professional academics, I cannot choose to leave the project once I publish a book on it. Since my commitment is to the underlying human rights cause as well as to the people and communities who have placed their trust in my work, I cannot simply "move on" to the next book project.

Elsewhere, I offer a detailed account of the theoretical and legal framework of the study (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011). For the purposes of this book, I will limit myself to outlining the four strengths of action research that I believe are illustrated by the type of process I have described. First, the rapid changing of the action researcher's roles and identities allows one to see the same social reality from distinct angles (that of the scientist, the activist, the judge, and the public official). The result, I believe, is a greater *empirical richness and precision* than is possible in other types of research. For instance, over the course of the project's several years, I have had the opportunity to interact with a broad range of actors who hold widely different views about economic development, indigenous peoples' rights, and the environment. In dozens of meetings, public debates, and field visits, the views of indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, high-ranking public officials and judges, journalists, business representatives, officials of the United Nations and inter-American human rights system, and academics have helped me understand both the complexity and the clear patterns that characterize the messy daily realities of socioenvironmental conflicts in Latin America and elsewhere.

Second, the design, questions, and results of the action-research project are directly informed by interactions

with actors on the ground and are planned with diverse audiences in mind. The result is a greater *relevance* of the research for multiple audiences, which can translate into influence in the fate of the issues under study. I have had the opportunity to appreciate this advantage firsthand. By following the thread of events in the three cases and remaining committed to the underlying cause and to the communities and organizations involved, I and my colleagues at Dejusticia have been able to provide useful information and expertise at key junctures. In Ecuador—after the government cracked down on indigenous and environmental organizations by revoking their registration and suing their leaders for "terrorism" for having organized marches and protests—we used the information we had gathered and our previous work on authoritarian governments to produce a report documenting widespread violations of the rights to protest and freedom of expression in Ecuador (Pásara 2014). The fact that the report was widely discussed in Ecuador—including by President Rafael Correa, who lashed out against it repeatedly on television and social media—attests to the relevance that this type of work can have. Similarly, in Brazil and Colombia, our action-research team has become a go-to resource in policy and media debates on indigenous peoples' rights, as well as a frequent collaborator in training workshops for grassroots communities, judges, human rights officials, and other influential audiences.

Third, by letting the rhythm of events lead the way, the action researcher achieves *immediate and continued access* to the places and people of her studies, who see her as just another participant instead of an intruder seeking to extract information. Interventions delivered

in multiple formats (such as opinion pieces and media appearances) also lend an immediacy to research products that is absent from traditional academic production, which can take years before coming to fruition. Unlike conventional researchers—for whom social practice is a laboratory where one wears rubber gloves and dissects events with the cold analytic scalpel of the professional scientist and from which one leaves untouched, never to return—action researchers tend to keep the conversation going with the people and communities for whom these events are not a laboratory but their lives. This creates the essential interpersonal glue—trust—that not only allows the action researcher to have continuous access but, more importantly, leads social actors to actively seek her involvement, as has been the case with the social leaders and progressive judges and public officials with whom we have worked.

Fourth, action research has an emotional strength that has been largely overlooked by the growing literature devoted to it. Because it involves direct contact with events and a multitude of people (protagonists in the cases, colleagues, diverse audiences, and so on)—and because it is explicitly inspired by moral convictions (such as the defense of a social justice cause or the construction of an institution that represents these convictions)—action research is a constant source of *motivation.* The adrenaline that runs through one's veins while standing between the blades of the windmill is a powerful incentive to continue working, and is one that tends to be lacking in the solitary work of professional scholars, who are expected to check their moral commitments at the door. As Burawoy writes in connection with the sociological windmill, "When the winds are

gale force it is impossible to get close [to it] without being drawn into its vortex" (2010, 5).

It is an exhilarating experience indeed—one made even more stimulating by the fact that it is always a *collaborative* enterprise, for only through the collective work of highly motivated individuals can the many commitments and activities of action research be achieved. For instance, the project on environmental conflicts and indigenous rights that I have been using as an illustration in this chapter has involved no fewer than twenty people throughout the years, including outstanding young researchers, human rights advocates, filmmakers, designers, and webmasters. Appropriately, several of the publications resulting from the project have been co-authored with young scholar-activists trained in action research (Rodríguez-Garavito and Baquero forthcoming; Rodríguez-Garavito and Orduz 2012). In the various instances when exhaustion or failures of our efforts have caused me doubt or disillusionment, these individuals' deep commitment, talent, and enthusiasm have been more than enough to move forward.

To my mind, these are the strengths of the practice of action research and the results that it generates. But each strength has its dark side, which gives rise to profound dilemmas. To them I now turn.

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Don Quixote versus the Windmill: The Dilemmas of Action Research

In a famous passage of *Don Quixote*, the novel's protagonist, accompanied by his faithful squire, Sancho Panza, spars with windmills that he mistakes for dangerous giants. As in Miguel de Cervantes's story of the celebrated knight, there is much that is quixotic in action research. It is a very ambitious undertaking, and can even be dangerous in contexts such as minefields. As in the novel, there is a high risk that something will go wrong in the story of the sociological windmill.

The main risks can be viewed as the flipsides of the four aforementioned strengths. First, the shifting of roles and activities that allows for a richer and more complete version of the facts inevitably leads to *dispersion*. The action researcher leaps from task to task, from one meeting to the next, from one place to another. For example, I remember writing my opinion pieces for a Colombian newspaper as I was in the midst of conducting fieldwork in the Brazilian and Ecuadorian jungles, only to then search anxiously for an internet cafe in a small town on my way back in order to submit it before the deadline. This risk of dispersion becomes permanent, which means that the concentration needed to convert empirical richness into quality academic products becomes impossible to achieve. In other words, the speed and immediacy of public interventions wind up

replacing the slower and more patient work of the social scientist. The result can be academic dilettantism.

Second, with relevance and influence comes the risk of a *loss of independence.* By interacting with multiple audiences, action researchers can be captured by one of them—for example, a state agency or company that hires them as a consultant, or a social movement that demands unconditional loyalty. I have personally lived this dilemma: a state agency that asked me to write a concept paper about a draft bill on prior consultation in Colombia was so uncomfortable with my position of guaranteeing indigenous rights that it decided to shelve the report; I have rejected several offers from mining companies to work as an "indigenous community relations consultant"; and several times I have had to explain to the indigenous movement why I would not sign their communiqués, even though I agreed with them. The reason was the same in all of these cases: I needed to maintain my professional role as an action researcher. Or, to paraphrase Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), I had to remain objective despite not being neutral. But this was not always well received by the above audiences.

In violent places and countries, relevance has an additional high cost: action researchers risk not only their independence but also their physical safety and lives. Precisely because action researchers are relevant, they are a problem for powerful, violent actors—from the state's armed forces to leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary squads, local mafias, or private armies serving companies. Ever since the publication of our book on Urrá, I have been advised by trustworthy local leaders not to go back to the region for safety reasons. And after

the publication of our report on the Ecuadorian government's persecution of social movement and political opposition leaders, it has become clear to me and to the heads of other organizations sponsoring the report that traveling to Ecuador may put us at risk of arrest.

In fact, the connection between relevance and personal danger is so close that I believe it is characteristic of action research in countries with a legacy of recent political violence (such as Colombia, South Africa, and many other countries of the global South represented in this volume) or volatile contexts such as minefields. Put more clearly: those who practice action research in these contexts can do so only because other action researchers who came before us sacrificed their lives, tranquility, or personal safety for the cause.

This was the moving revelation of a conversation that I had in Johannesburg with the new generation of researchers from SWOP, the center founded by Eddie Webster, our "sociological windmill," who was also present. The youngest members were the ones who remembered that several of Webster's colleagues had been murdered by state forces for their anti-apartheid academic and political work. Without such extreme commitment and persistence on the part of Webster and his surviving colleagues, SWOP might have disappeared at the hands of the apartheid regime.

The same can be said of action research—and, in fact, of social science and legal research in general—in Latin America. Indeed, some of the pioneering centers of Latin American social science (such as the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning, co-founded by Fernando Henrique Cardoso) served as refuges for academics being persecuted for their studies and their

militant critiques of the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, from the beginning, the human rights movement and action research were intimately tied, and some philanthropic organizations (such as the Ford Foundation) that had previously tended to support only academic programs in the region inaugurated programs to finance the then-emerging human rights NGOs when it came to light that the academics who supported these NGOs were being killed, threatened, and exiled (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

In the most violent countries, such as Colombia, many action researchers have paid with their lives or with exile for having raised their voices against the various armed groups. In fact, the founder of one of the most influential strands of action research—sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, the creator of participatory action research—was arbitrarily detained in 1979 by the government of Julio César Turbay on unfounded charges of belonging to the guerrilla group M-19. Furthermore, in the 1990s, the most influential academic center for the study of violence at the time (the Institute of Political Studies and International Relations of the National University of Colombia) was persecuted so harshly and systematically that a good number of its researchers ended up in exile. Some (such as Eduardo Pizarro) were targets of the FARC, while others (such as Álvaro Camacho and Iván Orozco) were targets of paramilitary groups; many of these individuals received research grants from the University of Notre Dame and elsewhere in order to escape the violence for a few years. With the caustic humor that Colombians have developed to endure this savagery, some called these sponsorships "Carlos Castaño Fellowships," a reference to the name

of the commander of the powerful paramilitary armies that forced many public intellectuals into exile at the end of the 1990s. Others did not manage to flee in time: in 2004, Alfredo Correa de Andreis, a well-known sociologist from the Caribbean coast, was assassinated in a plot involving paramilitaries and the intelligence agency of the Colombian state. Although those of us who practice action research in Colombia today face personal risks that we must anticipate and manage with extreme prudence—for example, by carefully coordinating fieldwork with local NGOs and communities—fortunately, we do not face the prohibitive level of risk experienced by our predecessors. To them we owe the spaces we now have in universities, civil society, the state, and the media.

Third, the drawback to immediate access to actors and events is *difficulty in achieving the analytic distance* so essential for academic work. Precisely because they are not intruders in a social "laboratory" from which they want to extract information, action researchers wind up entangled in events, unable to leave in order to think and write. The problem with the windmill is that it never stops turning. And the vertigo of this perpetual movement can inhibit the tranquility and distance necessary to theorize and unravel the patterns that connect the facts. I was acutely aware of this dilemma on an almost daily basis, as the never-ending demands and unpredictable twists and turns of public engagement kept crowding out my plans to sit down and write the book I had intended to write, which explains why it took me three extra years to complete it.

Finally, the flipside of emotional adrenaline is *burnout*. Motivated by their moral and personal commitments to their audiences and institutions, action researchers

can end up in the vortex about which Burawoy writes. Before reading his account of the sociological windmill, I had used the same word—vortex—to describe the sensation I felt when practicing action research, interacting with so many different people in so many diverse places at such a dizzying speed. The experience is as exultant as it is exhausting. Going from minefields to classrooms and then to hearings before national and international human rights agencies and courts is fascinating. But it requires a work pace that can be inadvisable and even unsustainable.

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Amphibious Research: Action Research in a Multimedia World

How can such difficulties be negotiated? There are no simple solutions. In the end, they are existential dilemmas, the kind that go hand in hand with the job itself. Those who enjoy the benefits of action research also accept its costs.

In this text, I have sought to be reflective about the difficulties of this endeavor. However, I do not want to end this text with this pessimistic tone, in part because a characteristic feature of action research is optimism. Or, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci (1971), its combination of scientific and moral commitments means that the pessimism of the intellect is mixed with the optimism of the will. Thus, an appropriate way to conclude is to mention, at least briefly, professional strategies that could mitigate the dilemmas and take advantage of the strengths of action research.

My argument is the following: to navigate the winds of the windmill, it is necessary to become amphibious. In the same way that amphibious animals or vehicles move from land to water, the action researcher should be able to move seamlessly through various media. In violent contexts, in addition to navigating water and earth, the action researcher must be able to face the fire.

This type of practice is what I refer to as amphibious research. Etymologically, “amphibian” means “one that lives a double life.” And, as we have seen, this is the defining characteristic of the action researcher.

Two strategies seem especially promising to advance amphibious research: one related to the texts that it produces and the other to additional forms of diffusion. I believe that one of the main reasons that action researchers suffer from dispersion and burnout is that the valid formats for the academic world (articles in indexed journals and books published by university presses) use a language and codes of communication that differ markedly from those expected by their other audiences (such as newspaper readers, social movement leaders, marginalized communities, television viewers, and the anonymous public of social media). The distance between these formats is so great that to be relevant in different worlds, one must live two (or more) parallel lives.

In the face of this dilemma, one solution is to cultivate intermediate genres of writing and diversify the formats in which the results of action research are disseminated. The first implies producing texts that are legible for a wider audience, without losing academic rigor. The second means that action research must be *multimedia*. As an amphibious animal moves from one natural medium to another, so the amphibious researcher translates his or her work products into different formats, from books and articles to videos, podcasts, blogs, and online classes. In both cases, the goal is to create products that can be circulated among academic audiences and the public sphere.

Precisely to foster this new genre of writing in the human rights field, in 2013 I founded, along with a team of outstanding researcher-advocates at Dejusticia, the Global Action-Research Workshop for Young Human Rights Advocates. The annual workshop brings together around twenty action researchers from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia for an intensive training in creative writing, social science research, and communications. Over ten days, expert journalists, researchers, and advocates from around the world lead hands-on, interactive sessions designed to guide participants in the use of these tools so that they can improve the quality and impact of their research and activism. We encourage them to be reflective about their own practice and to incorporate narratives—including personal stories—into their writing. The goal is to have them tell stories of the struggles they wage in collaboration with victims of human rights violations in different parts of the world, with the aim of fostering creativity and reflexivity in human rights circles. Instead of, or in addition to, having professional researchers (usually from the global North) document and publish these stories, the workshop aims to give a voice to those working on the ground.

To that end, we spend ten intense days together doing fieldwork, visiting grassroots communities, and holding workshop sessions in a region of Colombia that is illustrative of the human rights issue selected for that year's workshop. For several months after the workshop, instructors work closely with participants to help them develop the paper outlines they submitted with their applications. After going through several rounds of revisions, participants' papers, along with

instructors' comments, are then compiled into an edited volume. The goal is that as the number of alumni and edited volumes grows, a community of action researchers will emerge that will be able to better communicate with a larger audience and have a more effective impact. We also hope that they will support one another and forge durable ties of solidarity and collaboration across different regions of the global South, as well as with like-minded researcher-activists from the global North.

Workshop participants and other practitioners of action research who wish to experiment with these strategies have a spectrum of fascinating opportunities available to them. For example, if they want to attempt a hybrid writing style combining academia and journalism, they can find support in the growing literature of journalists and nonfiction authors who write with the fluidity of their trades while incorporating theories and empirical findings from the social sciences. Such writers have addressed topics as diverse as African dictatorships (Kapuściński 2001), political violence in Colombia (García Márquez 1993), urban life in contemporary India (Mehta 2005), drug trafficking and slum culture in Latin America (Alarcón 2012), job insecurity in the United States (Ehrenreich 2008), and the future of online social movements (Gladwell 2010).

Also aiming for this middle point are academics who borrow narrative tools from journalism and literature. The results are ethnographies, chronicles, and essays written for broad audiences on topics such as the politics of clientelism in Argentina (Auyero 2001) and forced displacement in Colombia (Molano 2005). Nonetheless, hybrid literature produced from the sidelines of

academia continues to be relatively scarce and timid in comparison with that produced outside universities. In this sense, the invitation of Fals Borda (1995) remains open: "Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals."

I believe that this encounter is fundamental for action research, not only because it can mitigate the action researcher's dispersion and burnout but also because there is a profound elective affinity between the action researcher and the investigative journalist who produces in-depth social analysis. Both use a combination of deep empirical work, creative reflection, and empathy and solidarity with their subjects. This is evident, for instance, in the description of "immersion journalism" offered by the legendary chronicler Ryszard Kapuściński in a book whose title—*A Cynic Wouldn't Suit This Profession*—already reveals an affinity with action research. Kapuściński describes his chronicles on Africa as an effort to portray and think about society "from within and below" (2002, 31), based on a lifetime of dialoguing and living with the subjects of his writings. With regard to the relationship between theory and experience in intellectual work, the Polish journalist maintains that "in the community of writers, a very simple distinction can be drawn between those who find inspiration in themselves and those who must be inspired by external forces. There are reflexive personalities and those that reflect the world" (ibid., 120). Speaking of his own work, he says something that could describe many

action researchers: "In my case. . . I reflect the world: I have to visit the place of events to be able to write. Staying in just one place, I die" (ibid., 120). Like amphibians, I would add.

I have tried to move my own work on minefields in this direction. After publishing an academic article that outlines the project's theoretical framework and illustrates it with the case study of the Urrá dam in Colombia (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011), I realized that the empirical richness of this story could not be told within the trappings of conventional academic writing. Indeed, the twenty years of the case tell more than a story about a dam. They tell a story of the core processes underlying the civil war and the dispute over land and natural resources in contemporary Colombia: the rise of right-wing paramilitary squads and their penetration into politics; the involvement of the FARC in drug trafficking and the struggle to control areas of cultivation and transport; forced displacement and land encroachment; the complicity of wide sectors of rural business in displacement and violence; the race for natural resources in a country turning toward a mining- and oil-based economy; and the tragic impact of all of this on indigenous peoples, whose lands, cultures, and lives are endangered for no other reason than their being caught in the crossfire. This is why I decided to co-author a book that weaves together the threads of this story, which had not been told in a systematic form (Rodríguez-Garavito and Orduz 2012). Although we performed the research with sociological tools, we wrote the book in the language of literary journalism with the hope of reaching a wider public, including indigenous peoples who today suffer similar cases in Colombia and elsewhere.

The experience was as challenging as it was gratifying, and it led me to write journalistic chronicles for the Colombian press regarding the other two cases of the study, before co-authoring with an action researcher—who was trained as such through this project—a more academic book that compares and theorizes the three cases (Rodríguez-Garavito and Baquero forthcoming).

But all of this refers to the written format, which is but one of the possible channels of expression for the amphibious researcher. An equally useful strategy for addressing some of the dilemmas of action research is to take advantage of its strengths in order to generate products in diverse formats. The dominance of texts in academic life means that action researchers exclude a large part of their work from their publications. Left out are many of the most interesting experiences and information resulting from their participation in meetings, events, fieldwork, and court proceedings. Further, confining one's work to academic books and newspaper articles means denying access to many potential audiences—from grassroots organizations and social movements to university professors and students in marginalized areas.

The opportunities to fill this gap are multiple. For example, the fact that internet users spend more than 80% of their time online watching videos creates a valuable opportunity for amphibious research. Given that action researchers have access to people and situations that are interesting for broad audiences, all they need to do is incorporate a video camera into their toolbox, alongside their tape recorder and notebook. In this way, they can generate valuable images that can be used in classes, in training courses for marginalized communities, as

evidence in legal proceedings, or as accompaniments to texts that result from the research. The same can be done with pictures, podcasts, and documents that they collect during their work and which can be easily disseminated through blogs, websites, and social media. This is why Dejusticia's Action-Research Workshop also trains participants to write blogs and shoot short videos. It is also the reason why we created a website, *Amphibious Accounts*,[1] whose title reflects the idea of amphibious research explained in this book and that features blogs, videos, and multimedia materials produced by alumni and instructors.

I have experimented with these formats in the project on minefields, with the help of other researchers and a professional film crew that accompanied us on our fieldwork. The interviews and shots have been made into documentaries that we disseminate for free over the internet, together with academic and journalistic texts on the project.[2] We have also written policy papers and educational booklets regarding the right to prior consultation. In this way, we hope to reach diverse audiences. While indigenous peoples' organizations tend to use the videos and booklets in the training courses that they run, university students prefer videos, public officials opt for policy papers, academics prefer analytic texts, and the wider public reads newspaper chronicles.

Of course, all this sounds easier than it is in reality. There is a long way to go before hybrid genres of

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1 See amphibiousaccounts.org

2 See, for instance, the documentary video we produced on the Sarayaku case at http://www.consultaprevia.org/#!/regional/1

writing and multimedia formats are formally recognized as a valid form of knowledge within academic communities. And moving from one medium to another creates new risks of dispersion, burnout, dependency, and dilettantism. In my case, I am still in the midst of experimenting with multimedia and have reached only incomplete and temporary solutions. But that is exactly the challenge of amphibious research.

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amphibious research in a Multimedia World

Action research combines academic studies, participation in public debates, public policy advocacy, and the strengthening of institutions (for example, think tanks and nongovernmental organizations).

This book explores the advantages and challenges of this type of work. Closely interacting with diverse audiences tends to give the action researcher greater empirical accuracy and relevance, and also serves as a source of motivation. Nevertheless, it can also lead to the risk of dispersion, lack of analytical distance, and burnout.

To help researchers capitalize on these advantages and overcome the difficulties, this book proposes a new technique—"amphibious research." This technique, which is based on methodological approaches and hybrid styles of writing, allows action researchers to gather contributions from different fields and to circulate their results in multimedia formats.

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