

# Unlocking the Potential of Participatory Action Research: *Two examples of impactful projects with OTECCA*

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In the 1940-50's, a new term and research methodology emerged in the literature: 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR). Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, introduced fundamental concepts related to PAR in his work on social and organisational change (Lewin 1946). Since then, PAR has evolved, especially in the context of community engagement and collective issues. The emergence of PAR represents a shift in the world of academia, evolving from top-down approaches and embracing more inclusive, dynamic and collaborative models (Chevalier et al. 2013). In the realm of collaborative and Participatory Action Research, the Observatoire de la Transition Écologique et Citoyenne Côte d'Azur (OTECCA – Observatory for socio-ecological transition in the French Riviera) was created in 2021 at Université Côte d'Azur (Nice, Alpes-Maritimes, Southern France). In line with PAR principles, OTECCA acknowledges that research methodologies and expertise can significantly contribute to the development of action plans while at the same time recognises that those directly concerned by a particular issue possess unique experiential understanding and contextual knowledge that are truly valuable when conducting research. Therefore, collaboration between them leads to more effective and sustainable outcomes and solutions rooted in and suitable for real-world challenges.

**1. Connecting Academia and local stakeholders**

OTECCA serves as a catalyst that brings together researchers and regional actors in the Alpes-Maritimes area as well as fosters mutual knowledge and collaborative relationships by organising events, coordinating PAR projects, establishing contacts and links and giving workshops. OTECCA truly considers that this approach is essential for addressing the complex challenges posed by the socio-ecological transition: agriculture/food, culture/education, democracy, energy, environment, habitat, health, solidarity, transport/urbanisation. OTECCA selects one of these challenges as a topic each year and organises a one-day event open to researchers and local stakeholders in order, to enhance reciprocal knowledge and identify collaborative themes and areas for future PAR projects. In 2022, the event focused on food resilience and agriculture: 'Food resilience and science-society collaboration: a dual challenge for the territory?'. It brought together more than 60 people and led to some recommendations on main objectives for the next two years. In 2023, stakeholders will be working on identifying collaborations on the topic of Air and pollution: Air, Health, Environment: 'What challenges and opportunities for research and action?'. In doing so,

OTECCA links academia to the current challenges and makes academic knowledge a dynamic force for positive change in the area.

OTECCA also launches an annual call for expressions of interest aimed at gathering project ideas or research needs and collaboratively developing projects. OTECCA's scientific committee - composed of researchers from various disciplines and civil society representatives - evaluates the propositions, and some of them are selected in order to build a PAR project. After its selection, the proposition is incubated through OTECCA's Science Shop: refining, connecting people, defining topics, co constructing and drafting the project with science and society project stakeholders. 'Science Shops' emerged in the 1970s' in Europe and then developed in France (Millot 2019, Leydesdorff and Ward 2019). They are incubation systems that facilitate science-society collaborations and projects (Bocquet 2013). Projects emerging from the process can be shaped in various forms and include different research fields on a case-by-case basis: starting with internships or student group projects, to PhDs or interdisciplinary research programs and from humanities to hard sciences. Following on, OTECCA coordinates the project: intermediation between stakeholders with different operating methods, vocabularies and objectives is a key aspect of OTECCA's role, along with monitoring, communication, scientific mediation, organisation of workshops and groupe discussions, using collective intelligence tools to facilitate the emergence of common solutions, and so on.

**2. MobiliScape: Redefining mobility patterns**

An example of OTECCA's commitment to collaborative action on socio-ecological challenges is MobiliScape project, a project coordinated by OTECCA in Vallée des Paillons, on the outskirts of Nice. The first idea of a collaborative project on mobility in the area emerged in 2022 when the Non-Governmental Organisation ACME (Action Citoyenne pour un Meilleur Environnement) responded to OTECCA's 2023 Open call for proposals. The proposal led to a collaboration between ACME, OTECCA and a researcher from Université Côte d'Azur taking the shape of a first Master's internship in Social Psychology. The student worked on identifying individual and collective barriers and drivers to change inhabitants' mobility behaviours in the Vallée des Paillons. Over time, a genuine hand-in-hand collaboration with local authorities and the community of municipalities (Communauté de Communes du Pays des Paillons, CCPP) developed. In addition to a survey and recommendations based on scientific literature in social psychology, five workshops addressed to citizens and two collective workshops for municipal representatives, NGOs and citizens that focused on transports and urbanism took place. The workshops led to the emergence of six action sheets with action plans, some of which fied the preliminary discussion of CCPP Climate Air Environmental Territorial Plan (PCAET). All results, findings and data produced over the collaboration have been sent to ACME and the local authorities.

Through this collaboration, OTECCA facilitated a transformative stage for the local development of soft mobility. The internship not only provided a platform for researchers to explore real-world applications of their expertise but also empowered the community through innovative psychological insights about the behaviour and needs of local residents and led to a deeper, broader collaboration. Following on, OTECCA and CCPP, in collaboration with municipalities, are now developing a double branch project on mobility called MobiliScape with a focus on

improving cycling paths and imagining new uses for abandoned train stations in the valley.

**3. CTR Project in the Roya Valley**

As another example of how OTECCA works on addressing local challenges with a participatory mindset, the Cultures en Terrasses (CTR) project in the Roya Valley arose after October 2020, when the valley was devastated by Storm Alex. Rethinking lifestyles and local development for a more resilient future in the valley then seemed essential. By engaging with both researchers (in economics, agronomy, geography, and history) and local stakeholders (NGOs, incubators), the initiative aims to establish a holistic consortium to reinvest traditional terraced agricultural spaces and foster sustainable socio-economic projects and solutions for risk mitigation and local development. While local actors work on mobilizing the public on the topic, initiating close relations and regular meetings with local authorities such as town halls, the community of municipalities (Communauté d'Agglomérations de la Riviera Française, CARF) and the prefecture (Mission Interministérielle pour la Reconstruction des Vallées, MIRV), the research team coordinated by OTECCA aims to contribute to the scientific understanding of the region and to empower and equip stakeholders with practical tools, data, recommendations and discussion materials for sustainable decision-making. To do so, OTECCA organised workshops and a collaborative session to define and prioritize on-the-ground realities and needs of agroecology project leaders and residents in the valley. In line with this objective, several research initiatives are currently led by the research team:

- The development of a mapping method: geographers have been developing a model based on LIDAR® data and Artificial Intelligence technology to automatically detect and characterize terrace spaces in the Roya Valley. It aims at identifying relevant terraces based on predefined selection criteria
- A contingent Valuation Analysis: economists are working on a study using contingent valuation analysis to explore the socio-economical value of terrace spaces in terms of living spaces, diversity of use, and evidence of a strong cultural heritage
- A Study of Agricultural Practices: an anthropological study is being formed to study both historical and current agricultural practices in the valley. The goal is to identify practices that could be particularly relevant in the fight against climate change, especially in terms of water conservation and that could be used by neo-rurals who wish to establish themselves in agriculture in the Roya Valley through an incubator partner of CTR
- The installation of captors and sensors on terrace spaces: the study aims to monitor weather and hydrological conditions and assess the resilience and potential of the terraces when facing intense climatic events.

The approach and collaboration not only enrich the research process but also ensure that the outcome suits the local needs and that it allows decision makers and local stakeholders to make informed decisions based on clear data in the face of environmental challenges.

In conclusion, OTECCA's actions to foster collaborations between academics and local stakeholders and its commitment to PAR are not merely an academic pursuit but an innovative solution and a transformative force to address current socio-ecological issues. The MobiliScape

and CTR projects are examples of the potential of collaborative research to help mitigation and adaption to climate change. In this era of increasing interconnectedness and global challenges, the synergy between academia and local stakeholders facilitated by OTECCA creates a pathway towards a sustainable future.

***References***


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