

A slow and steady journey with Action Research

Interview with Malida Mooken

Malida Mooken, Danilo Streck, Miren Larrea

Danilo and Miren:

You are from Mauritius, you studied in Scotland, and you live in Canada. How do you think this has influenced your perspective on the global challenges we are facing nowadays?

Malida:

My perspectives of current global challenges are indeed shaped by where I come from, where I have been, and where I am: geographically and also culturally, philosophically, and emotionally. I often find myself positioned in more than one place or space, living in-between, back and forth, unsettled.

After my first degree and subsequently working for a few months in an offshore management company, I left Mauritius to undertake a Master degree at the University of Birmingham, in England. That was in 2007. The Master programme had a strong basis in industrial economics and I gained a critical appreciation of capitalism, globalisation, governance, and the impact of those on the competitiveness, and socio-economic development of industries, localities, regions, and countries. The scholarly work of Roger Sugden and Keith Cowling, especially *Transnational Monopoly Capitalism* had a significant influence on my thinking. My enhanced understanding of those issues led me to take a more critical look at the socio-economic development of Mauritius, which is often portrayed as an “economic success story in Africa” and I read about development in other small state economies. My concerns were centred on the effect of globalisation, activities of transnational corporations, and premature deindustrialisation. Those concerns were also tied in to my personal observations (from a young age) of changes taking place, for example in the textile industry, and the more general and increasing emphasis on the service sector in Mauritius.

I later moved to Scotland for my doctoral studies. There, I found myself mostly interested in reading philosophical texts by John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, Paulo Freire: to name a few. A significant and lasting influence on understanding socio-economic issues has been the human development and capability approach (HDCA) developed by Amartya Sen and other scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, Sabina Alkire, and Ingrid Robeyns. A fundamental concern of the approach is with freedom and human flourishing, inspired by the works of Aristotle, Adam Smith, Rabindranath Tagore, among others. From reading Sen, I got interested in *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill and the much less discussed book of Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The “human” substantive individual and collective freedoms, relational aspects, value judgments, choice, action and consequences became more central in my thinking.

An offer of a postdoctoral research position at the University of British Columbia brought me to British Columbia in Canada. My experience here has triggered reflections about the in-

tersection of race, gender, class and nation, and linguistic, economic, and political forms of discrimination/ domination. Many of those issues are invariably associated with histories of colonialism and imperialism, and I have become acutely aware of how Euro-American centric my educational journey (including in Mauritius) has been. Conversations with a student about the academic system, indigenous governance, and on-going colonial practice, were especially thought-provoking, and gave me the last push to introspect on my beings and doings.

I have since been interacting with work on decoloniality, post coloniality and knowledge democracy to unlearn and learn. In January 2021, I was invited to join a group of early career researchers in the Qualitative Research Lab – Global South. In that group, I discovered, read and discussed the works of Gurmindher K. Bhambra, Bagele Chillisa, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Walter Mignolo, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Aníbal Quijano, among others. We also share our own experiences and perspectives of current and past political, economic, social, and cultural issues in different countries, transcending geopolitical borders/boundaries.

My interactions over the years, conversing and respectfully debating with friends, classmates, colleagues, collaborators, students, and acquaintances from diverse backgrounds and parts of the globe have been invaluable, and have contributed significantly in shaping my view of the world. They brought forth the interconnectedness, responsibilities to each other and the planet, respect for differences, and the need to take an interest in problems facing citizens around the world. I have learnt to critically appreciate local-regional-global dynamics, and the importance of listening, observing, learning, and sharing with other citizens affected by pressing challenges, including climate change, food security, and equitable healthcare in different contexts.

Danilo and Miren:

How did you first encounter Action Research during your own academic career?

Malida:

I first encountered Action Research at the beginning of my doctoral studies. Alongside and linked to the PhD, I worked as a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) Associate for a project between a university and an arts organisation. The main idea was to develop an evaluation framework to articulate the socio-economic impact of the organisation's activities. I did an inquiry in real-time: 'trailing' and collaborating with participants. I think, at the time, my thesis supervisor had heard of discussions about Action Research taking place at the Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness in San Sebastian. A few readings and references were shared with me, including Elden and Levin (1991), Gustavsen (1992), Levin and Nilssen and Finne (1995), Greenwood and Levin (1998, 2001), and Reason and Bradbury (2001). One thing led to another and I came across John Dewey's writings on inquiry, experience, and education, which resonated a lot with me.

I started to develop the inquiry for the KTP project with Action Research in mind. Soon after, I attended a workshop "Cooperative Action Research Activities" at Orkestra. I remember a presentation that you (Miren) and James Karlsen gave there, which concretised what doing Action Research in the field of regional/territorial development might imply.

Danilo and Miren:

How did this encounter change your view of research?

Malida:

I learnt about the possibility of bridging the gap between theory and practice through approaches that were action-oriented, context-bound, dialogical, and participatory. That, together with my experience in the Knowledge Transfer Partnership project, reinforced the relevance of Action Research. I became particularly interested in the idea of co-generating learning and knowing, which seemed more appropriate and truthful than the linearity of “knowledge transfer” from one actor to the other, typically from the university to the partner organisation.

It is one thing to read about Action Research, and another to put it into practice though. I was questioned by other academics about why I was trying “something different” and not applying what I “already knew”. Fundamentally, I was against adopting a pre-determined framework, and I argued for letting the collaborative inquiry with the participants develop. Any conceptualisation had to emerge during and as a result of that process. I was not interested in testing an existing framework developed by others, which did not seem relevant to what I was observing/experiencing in the context of the arts organisation.

A key learning has been that Action Research as a process is fluid, not fixed. I also bear in mind that research can mean or signal different things to different people. It takes time and conscious effort to develop trust, a shared language, and understanding with collaborators/participants.

Danilo and Miren:

Could you please give us some context about what kind of Action Research projects you develop?

Malida:

For the last few years, I have been working with colleagues to develop projects in relation to the territorial development of the wine-producing regions in British Columbia. We actively engage with wine industry actors, policy-makers, and other publics to identify and understand strategic concerns, and to determine what and how the university can support them to address challenges and stimulate collaborative action. We have worked on issues such as quality and labelling, territorial identity, international positioning, collaboration, and focal areas for research and development. I should say that although the projects have characteristics of Action Research, they have not been explicitly or formally set up or labelled as “Action Research” projects.

To stimulate reflections, foster dialogue and trust, and co-generate knowledge and collaborative action amongst participants, we organise and facilitate safe spaces such as workshops and retreat-style forums. Other on-going engagement with industry actors takes place through informal conversations, participation in industry meetings, workshops, and conferences, and educational visits with students.

Danilo and Miren:

Is Action Research mainstream in your university? What were the challenges when proposing it?

Malida:

I have yet to see or hear anything that would suggest Action Research is mainstream. There seems to be more and more projects geared towards community engagement in some form of the other though.

Some colleagues and I share interest in the role of universities with regards to socio-economic development activities in the territory. For the projects that we work on, a core concern is with engaging the industry and other publics on challenges that they face in the territory, and to provide support where appropriate. I would say such interests and concerns contributed to an openness to Action Research, or at least, elements of it.

Institutional structures and processes can pose challenges. For example, requirements and language used (“recruitment of normal/control participants”, “inclusion and exclusion criteria”, “summary of procedures”) in behavioural ethical reviews are counterintuitive to the real and distinct nature of Action Research projects, and how they develop in practice. I feel, in general, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of knowledge and understanding about action research and its diverse approaches: conceptually and in practice. In my experience, it is not taught and discussed enough in academia, in fields such as management and territorial development. Traditional, often positivist, perspectives remain dominant.

Danilo and Miren:

Whose work have you found most influential when deciding to do Action Research in British Columbia, Canada? How did these encourage you to take steps in your own path?

Malida:

Doing Action Research in British Columbia (BC) was a natural progression from the inquiry approach that I developed for my PhD and the KTP. As implied before, John Dewey’s work has been particularly influential in that regard. There was significant interest in exploring and doing something along those lines in the context of the wine industry in British Columbia, and that was a strong reason why I joined UBC as a postdoctoral research fellow.

For me, the work on Action Research for territorial development (ARTD), developed by yourself, Miren, with James Karlsen and other colleagues has been particularly insightful. ARTD provided key reference points, which I found useful as an early career scholar working in the field of regional and territorial development, where Action Research is relatively less discussed, and written about. It helped to clearly position what we do in British Columbia at the intersection of territorial development and Action Research. I have drawn on your conceptualisation to reflect on and to articulate our own practical experience, learning and conceptual thinking in the context of British Columbia. It has inspired me to open up and write more about the process of doing Action Research, including the challenges involved.

Danilo and Miren:

What would you say about Action Research to a young researcher who has never heard about it?

Malida:

I would start a dialogue with the researcher about what she/he is interested in doing and achieving through research. I would share how for me Action Research (in the context of territorial development) is about going beyond one’s own narrow research interests, analysis

and understanding, to connect with other actors in society to address problematic situations. It involves contributing to collective knowing and change in those situations, rooted in the interplay between theory and practice, and real-life experiences.

When teaching Action Research, I find it useful to discuss actual projects with students. This allows us to talk about the underlying philosophies, purposes, processes, and outcomes in more-depth. There are no two Action Research projects that are alike, not least because it depends on the values of those involved and the context. In addition to reading, I would encourage young researchers to participate in workshops, or small group discussions on Action Research, to learn about the various approaches and challenges from experienced Action Researchers. I also believe that one truly gets a deep sense of Action Research through learning by doing. Another suggestion would thus be to join in an Action Research project, if possible.

Danilo and Miren:

You have published some first-person insights on doing Action Research in the background, and feeling your contribution was to a large extent invisible. Could you tell us something about this?

Malida:

When I think back about my journey, I realise that I have developed (and am still developing) my approach to Action Research slowly and steadily. A significant part of my work has taken place in the background: planning, organising, conceptualising, facilitating and reflecting on content and processes with collaborators. I do not think that working in the background is unusual, but what I did find problematic after some time was a lack of recognition and visibility with regards to the contribution made, both conceptually and practically.

I remember a comment from a workshop participant, who queried why the lead academic *needed* me. When asked what he meant, the response was what/how did I and another colleague contribute to the project? In itself, the question is not irrelevant, and I reckon it arose because we were mostly sitting in the background taking notes during workshops and forums. However, what did bother me is *how* the question was posed, and also that the questioning was directed to us and not to others in the group. There have been various other instances where I felt that being in the background was problematic.

The words of a university colleague regarding potential discrimination, in general, because of how others might perceive me also echoed in my mind. I do not recall the exact words used to describe me, but they were along the following lines: “a petite young vulnerable Mauritian woman”. This was not the first time I heard such a comment from a senior academic, and I really do not think that on either occasion any of those colleagues meant disrespect or harm. Nor did I find such comments to be personally distressing. I find that they reveal more about others’ mindset than myself. Nevertheless, I became more conscious that my identity and intersectional markers (linked, for example, to race, gender, age, and culture) might have something to do with how I and my work were being perceived and taken for granted, and what seemed like limited valuable opportunities to me. Power dynamics, which are intrinsically linked to those, also came to mind.

I have to say here that I have good working relationships with colleagues that I work closely with, and I am known to be quite direct in saying things as they are. However, back then, I felt people would be defensive if I expressed myself on such issues. Part of the problem might

have been that I did not have the right words to articulate what was going on. Gradually, a growing sense of frustration and negativity crept in, and I knew those would be detrimental to me, both personally and professionally. I engaged in a form of first-person inquiry, to try and understand for myself what was happening, and to explore what I could do to change things. Through the inquiry, I began to identify and accept that the problem was more systemic than personal (as in it was not about me or directed solely towards me. It was fundamentally about the system that I was in). Once I had some clarity, I voiced out certain issues: pointing to what I observed and felt was going on around me, in academia and elsewhere. Reading, talking, and learning from other researchers about similar experiences or concerns really helped, which is why I am sharing some of my experience in this interview.

Miren, your reflections in *Roots and Wings of Action Research for Territorial Development* about the invisibility of facilitation, especially through a gender lens, in Action Research for Territorial Development were also thought-provoking, and led me to take a critical look at what was going on in my own environment. It catalysed my writing of the first-person insights that you mentioned, and it was liberating. I was able to process and articulate thoughts and emotions that I had held in for a long time.

Things have started to change. Writing and publishing about our work in British Columbia have in part helped in gaining more visibility in some arenas. In recent times, I have had more visibility and opportunities for my work to be openly recognised. And yet, those opportunities seem few and far in-between, and I feel there is much more left to do and change!

Danilo and Miren

How did power dynamics, nationality, racial differences, gender, age, hierarchy, social class, and culture influence your own Action Research path?

Malida:

Coming out of my own lived experiences and knowing about others' experiences, I am more critically aware of how those factors may impact interactions, inter-subjectivities, and opportunities for myself and for others. That has been an important part of my Action Research journey.

The first-person inquiry, which I discussed earlier on, led me to engage more with writings on intersectionality, and deepened my understanding and thinking on identity. I integrated some of that thinking in discussion with colleagues, and the work that I was contributing to on territorial identity with wine industry actors. To illustrate, a word that typically came up in discussions on the identity of the territory was "diversity", but it was mostly interpreted in terms of grape varietals, geographical and climatic conditions, and winemaking practices. The "human" aspect was missing. Reflections from my first-person inquiry in turn inspired me to do some secondary research about how diversity was approached in other wine-producing territories. I found some interesting narratives and wrote a short one-pager on diversity and identity, which we shared with industry actors in workshops across British Columbia. That opened up discussions, for example on race, age, gender, and culture.

Currently, my colleagues and I are considering the possibility of doing some work with regards to agricultural farmworker health and housing conditions. Many of those workers are migrants, who face various challenges, not least because of their nationalities, race, social class, culture, and power dynamics. For our next forum, part of our discussions will focus on health and housing issues. We will organise and facilitate discussion on those, so that par-

ticipants from the wine industry in British Columbia can reflect on and discuss what is going on elsewhere, for example in Napa Valley, and in their own wine regions. This is linked to the idea of raising critical consciousness and opening up possibilities for collective dialogue and knowing, so that participants can develop effective ways to address shared concerns and challenges.

An increased awareness of those factors also informs how I approach curriculum development and teaching as an Associate Director for our post-experience Master of Management. For example, in July 2022, our guest speakers for a two-week Intensive included a volunteer for a migrant justice collective, and a research co-ordinator working on homelessness. As signalled by the speakers, those are unusual discussion topics and experiences to discuss in a management programme.

Danilo and Miren:

You are the youngest of the editors of International Journal of Action Research. How did your relationship with this journal start, and how do you feel about being one of its editors?

Malida:

Miren, I think you mentioned about the 2020 International Journal of Action Research (IJAR) symposium during or soon after my visit to Orkestra in 2019. I signed up for the symposium and preparatory sessions, which were held online because of the pandemic. I had the opportunity to interact with various participants, including editors of IJAR, both in smaller group and in the larger group discussions. I would say that is how the relationship started.

It is an honour to be an editor of IJAR, working with both of you, and the other editors, Olav Eikeland, Richard Ennals, Emil Sobottka and Isabel Heck. If I may say, our respective backgrounds and experiences make for a very interesting group dynamic. I have found our conversations, for example on how Action Research is developing, the vision for the journal, and exploring new possibilities to support authors and contribute to the field of Action Research, to be very meaningful.

Danilo and Miren:

How do you think we could make the journal more appealing to young researchers?

Malida:

I think that continuing to personally invite more young researchers to join in discussions, workshops, and symposiums, as you have been doing, really helps. Perhaps strengthening the journal's presence online, for example through podcasts and social media platforms, might also be useful in enhancing IJAR's presence, and reaching out to a younger and wider audience.

Danilo and Miren:

What would you like to see in International Journal of Action Research in the future?

Malida:

As we discussed in the editors' meetings (and you would know more about this than I), the International Journal of Action Research has been mindfully working towards being more inclusive. I would like to see continued development in that direction with authors from

various parts of the world writing and publishing about Action Research projects, thereby opening up perspectives and dialogues about different workplace and territorial contexts. I would also like to see if we can include and encourage publications such as visual essays in the journal. This ties in to arguments for democratising forms of expression, and hopefully overcoming some of the limitations of having English as the dominant language in mainstream academic publishing.

Danilo and Miren:

Thanks very much Malida for a thought provoking, inspiring and gratifying interview which will be very important for everyone, but especially for younger researchers approaching Action Research through IJAR.