

Reformulating action research to facilitate territorial responses to climate change

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Abstract: This article serves as an introduction to the special issue by presenting the results of a learning process shared by action researchers coming from different action research traditions and geographical areas. The goal of this learning process has been to generate explicit criteria and features that action researchers can integrate in their facilitative work in territorial development processes to make these development processes more effective in facing climate change. These criteria relate to the roots of climate change, justice, innovative ways to understand democracy and governance, the contribution of feminism to climate change and the role of emotions when facing it. These reflections and learnings are synthesized into twelve principles for *action research for territorial development* (ARTD).

Key words: Action research, climate change, territorial development, justice, democracy, feminism, emotions

Una reformulación de la investigación-acción para facilitar respuestas territoriales al cambio climático

Resumen: Este artículo sirve como introducción al número especial al presentar los resultados de un proceso de aprendizaje compartido por investigadores en la acción provenientes de diferentes tradiciones de investigación-acción y áreas geográficas. El objetivo de este proceso de aprendizaje ha sido generar criterios y características explícitos que los investigadores en la acción puedan integrar en su facilitación de procesos de desarrollo territorial, para hacer que estos procesos sean más efectivos a la hora de enfrentar el cambio climático. Estos criterios se relacionan con las raíces del cambio climático, la justicia, las formas innovadoras de entender la democracia y la gobernanza, la contribución del feminismo al cambio climático y el papel de las emociones a la hora de combatirlo. Estas reflexiones y aprendizajes se sintetizan en doce principios de la investigación-acción para el desarrollo territorial (ARTD).

Palabras clave: Investigación-acción, cambio climático, desarrollo territorial, justicia, democracia, feminismo, emociones

1. Introduction

There is growing awareness that we must transform how we live, produce, and consume if we want to ensure a future for the generations to come. We, the authors of this paper, believe that action research can play a role in achieving this. However, the formulations of action research in the past are insufficient to make the difference needed for the future. To respond to the eco-challenges of our time, we have to transform action research.

Like the rest of the papers in this special issue, this is a position paper. We argue for some critical transformations of our practice, framed as *action research for territorial development* (ARTD). Nonetheless, our position is not based exclusively on our own reflections; it is the result of three years of reflection and discussions with colleagues, as we presented in this issue's editorial. The first step was to publish our initial concerns on how climate change challenged territorial development and our proposal to use action research to respond to this problem (Larrea and Costamagna, 2023). We presented and discussed that document in various action research fora and invited various action researchers who we believed could make a relevant contribution to write short position chapters with their thoughts. We are from different territories and even continents, Pablo from Latin America and Miren from Europe, and we invited authors from the global South and North. We sought to include these diverse perspectives in the discussion because, in our experience, action research communities in Europe and Latin America often have little interaction due to differences in culture, language, and action research traditions, among other factors.

Once the first drafts of their contributions were written, we arranged conversations between authors who addressed similar issues, and together, we learnt about what transformations ARTD needed to undergo to be more effective. Our position here is the result of those learning processes, and we have expressed it through twelve principles we believe ARTD must consider to generate a territorial response to climate change. We hope they prove useful for action researchers working in neighbourhoods, municipalities, cities, or regions in processes where governments and public administrations and their policies are part of transformative projects.

Our paper is structured so as first to share our position in the form of twelve principles for ARTD. We then present the discussions that have inspired them.

2. Action research for territorial development as a political position

We have always considered ARTD to be political (Costamagna and Larrea, 2018) and our arguments have often been inspired by the words of Paulo Freire:

It was no longer possible to exist except by being available to the radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and impudence, between the beauty and the ugliness of the world. That is to say, it was no longer possible to exist without assuming the right or duty to choose, to decide, to fight, to do politics. (Freire, 2008, p. 51).

Recognising the political nature of what we do means that, even though we are researchers and educators, our research is a transformation process with a specific directionality towards what we consider to be a better world. Given the diverse interpretations of what constitutes a better world, this section synthesises the elements that help us define the direction we want to take in transforming our action research. In the following sections, we address the specific contributions of each participant in the process, citing their publications in this special issue or the collective book (Costamagna and Larrea, 2024).

The twelve principles shared here are our proposal to the ARTD community, and they complement the five features underlined in Larrea and Costamagna (2023): praxis, capacity building, participation, explicit political nature, and facilitation. Our goal with this special

issue is to initiate a dialogue that can lead us to transform our practices to better facilitate the grand eco-social transformations that our world urgently needs.

The twelve principles for transforming action research for territorial development and ensuring it is better suited to face climate change are the following:

- a) We assume that human activity has crossed the planet's absorption limits in more than one field and that, if drastic measures are not taken soon, humanity risks facing an irreversible process that endangers its future.
- b) The limits that nature establishes on the functioning of the predominant economic system have been forgotten and disregarded. This system seeks to achieve unlimited sustained economic growth, which requires and will probably require material growth, and this is impossible on a finite planet. In order to change this, we need to rethink our consumption and production patterns.
- c) As researchers and educators, we believe that the contribution of science to solving these challenges is imperative. However, we also recognise that these processes are of a deeply political nature. The existing theoretical and empirical contributions are not completely conclusive regarding the compatibility of sustainability and growth. While our response is not to assume degrowth as our theoretical framework, we advocate for a transformative praxis that will probably require degrowth in certain activities in order to solve the problem.
- d) To move forward in solving the problem, we must go to its root, and the root of this problem lies in capitalism as it exists today. In territorial development, we do not have a theoretical narrative of what the alternative is, but following our principles based on praxis, it is essential to initiate emerging processes that seek to transform at least its neoliberal, patriarchal and colonial nature.
- e) Territorial development must challenge the belief that GDP is a good indicator of a territory's performance and that the ultimate goals of our society demand the pursuit of continual growth. In our view, the way to remove GDP growth from the core of territorial development is by placing life at its centre. In this regard, there are lessons we can learn from feminism.
- f) The dialogue between the South and the North within ARTD must help us become aware of the global patterns of domination, exploitation, and conflict in which our relationship with life has been shaped. This pattern divides humanity, imposing the idea that some people and cultures are considered superior to others.
- g) As a research and educational community located in both Europe and Latin America, our aim is to move towards epistemic justice by acknowledging Eurocentrism and overcoming the divide between knowledge that is deemed ancient or traditional, with concepts such as *buen vivir*¹ and knowledge that is considered scientific, modern, or advanced.
- h) We are aware that the profound transformations we need to undergo will generate tensions around democracy. For this reason, we consider it important to strengthen and deepen democracy by making the responses to climate change democratic.
- i) It is essential to seek new definitions of territory and its relational processes to reconfigure our connection to nature. We need to understand territorial development in a way that

1 This is a Spanish term inspired by the cosmovision of the Quechua people and describes a way of living based on communitarian, ecological, and culturally sensitive values.

overcomes reductionist and utilitarian features of anthropocentrism and includes all beings.

- j) We believe that the subjective experience of climate change is a crucial element in building solutions and that mobilising the power of emotions can improve our ability to move from intellectual understanding of the problem to transformative action.
- k) Action research for territorial development has the potential to articulate these transformation processes, integrating the above principles into our day-to-day work with territorial actors in each specific context. To make these contextual processes significant on a global level, it is paramount that action researchers around the world collaborate in this endeavour.
- l) The previous principles lead us to face multiple conflicts. We believe that constructing solutions requires overcoming dichotomic thinking about them. Only through dialogue and agreement among those who think differently about the problem can the mobilisation necessary for the challenge be possible (Larrea, 2024).

3. The root of the problem: The meaning of development in capitalism

The first discussion that inspires the previous principles relates to the roots of the problem. If we want action research to make a difference in facing climate change, it must be radical in the sense that it has to start by raising awareness of the roots of the problem. The following sections address what this means in the context of territorial development.

3.1. Growth and GDP at the core of territorial development

ARTD has been practised since 2008 at the intersection of action research and territorial development. Our territorial development tradition (Albuquerque et al., 2008) has evolved from the concept of local economic development and has integrated dimensions other than economic (social, environmental, political, and institutional).

In this context, the specific practice of action research has taken place through the collaboration between action researchers and policymakers. Our discourse has always distinguished between development and growth as different concepts, and we have claimed that our aim is the well-being of the people living in a territory and not the growth of its GDP. However, in practice, GDP has remained the main indicator used by policymakers to determine whether the situation is “good or bad”. Although it is conceptually obsolete in the literature on territorial development, GDP growth continues to play a key role in diagnosing situations and establishing goals for policymaking.

The literature on degrowth has proposed an alternative, but our experience is that this concept is frightening for policymakers and even a tabu in certain contexts. It provokes vigorous contestation, often by powerful sectors of our society. As action researchers, we are thus facing two facts here. On the one hand, there is no evidence of decoupling, meaning we cannot rely on technology to make growth sustainable. Therefore, if we prioritise sustainability, we cannot continue growing. On the other hand, merely proposing degrowth for

discussion leads to mistrust and defensive behaviour, which stagnates action research processes.

Albuquerque (2024) and Navarro (2024) present solutions to help ARTD find feasible spaces for action. Navarro suggests not taking degrowth as an a priori theoretical framework and recommends starting with praxis to solve concrete problems. While the process of solving these issues will likely require degrowth, it will not come as an imposition but as a necessary condition in specific situations. Albuquerque even proposes using a different term: *re-conversion of the economic activity*. Again, this reconversion will call for degrowth in certain activities and places but not in all.

We believe that these proposals are consistent with the way ARTD offers soft resistance, combining (a) a relational dimension that keeps the process going by adapting to stakeholders' requirements and (b) a critical approach to those requirements.

In the spaces where we participate, ARTD must raise awareness of the need for this deep reconversion of economic activity and help policymakers in each process understand how this affects their specific policies.

3.2. Life at the core of territorial development

If growth and GDP are not to be the core of territorial development, what is? Our preliminary answer in Larrea and Costamagna (2023) was that life must be the core of territorial development. Life must be the core of territorial development. This idea has been most effectively presented in feminism, which is why we invited Eleonora Spinelli and Patricia Gaya (see her position paper in this issue) to help us in its development.

Spinelli (2024) shared the following words of Magdalena León that frame our perspective (2012):

"The crisis is now recognized not only as a result of neoliberalism, but also as a result of the 'civilizing' model. We cannot further ignore that fundamental changes in the ways of producing, consuming, and organizing life can no longer be postponed. Feminist postulates of an economy centered in the care for life, based on cooperation, complementarity, reciprocity and solidarity, are currently relevant. They are not only proposals from women for women, but from women for countries, for humanity. (p. 36)

Spinelli (2024) also reminds us that although ARTD gives centrality to the collective definition of problems, there is an absence of women not only in decision-making spaces regarding the climate crisis agenda but, equally importantly, in the construction of problems and diagnoses. This contributes to the sustained centrality of capital and economic growth in territorial development, creating unfavourable conditions that do not prioritise life. From this perspective, care, historically provided by women to ensure the continuity of life, is pivotal when considering sustainable development.

ARTD must also take into account that when we speak of life, we are referring to not only human life but all life forms, encompassing life in the past, the present, and the future. Even imagining how this can be integrated into our action research processes is difficult. This gives us a sense of the profound transformations needed in our beliefs, values, and paradigms before we are ready to facilitate the processes our communities require. In another paper in this special issue, Patricia Gaya offers proposals on feminist decolonial action research to help us reflect on how we can take steps in this direction.

4. A new way of thinking about territory

Development is not the only core concept in ARTD that we need to revisit. Our understanding of territory is also at stake.

When we proposed ARTD in Karlsen and Larrea (2014), our definition of territory was inspired by Albuquerque (2012) as: “the actors who live in a place with their social, economic and political organization, their culture and institutions as well as the physical environment they are part of”. This definition gives actors a central position and does not necessarily refer to any single territorial level, i.e., – it does not exclusively refer to the municipal, local, or regional level. We have also used Albuquerque’s definition of territorial development as “the process of mobilization and participation of different actors (public and private) in which they discuss and agree on the strategies that can guide individual as well as collective behavior”.

Our goal in 2014 with this definition was twofold. On the one hand, we wanted to distance ourselves from approaches to territorial development that interpreted territory merely as natural *resources* for economic activity. On the other hand, we wanted to have a definition that would be consistent with participatory processes, and focusing on actors, their agency, participation, and mobilisation seemed a good choice.

Today, we are aware that our practice of territorial development has been anthropocentric, and we need to revisit our definitions to see how they affect our understanding of territory and territorial development (Rébola, 2024). The contributions of Cummings (2024) have helped us reflect on this issue, in which he suggests we must move from the current situation of “bad development” (extractivist and destructive of ecosystems) to environmentally sustainable and regenerative processes. To do that, we must recognise and integrate the agency and rights of other biological beings that inhabit and transform territories into our processes. Only through this approach can we generate an understanding of *ecosystem well-being*.

We never conceptually defined the actors in our processes as being human, but we always had human beings in mind. We feel that we have a long way to go before we fully comprehend the implications of these changes in the way we perceive territory and territorial development. That is why our proposal is to gradually transform our definitions as we gain a better understanding of the problem we are facing. As a first step, we propose to redefine territory as “the biological actors that live in a place with their natural, social, economic, political, and environmental interactions, their culture, and institutions, and the physical environment they are part of”.

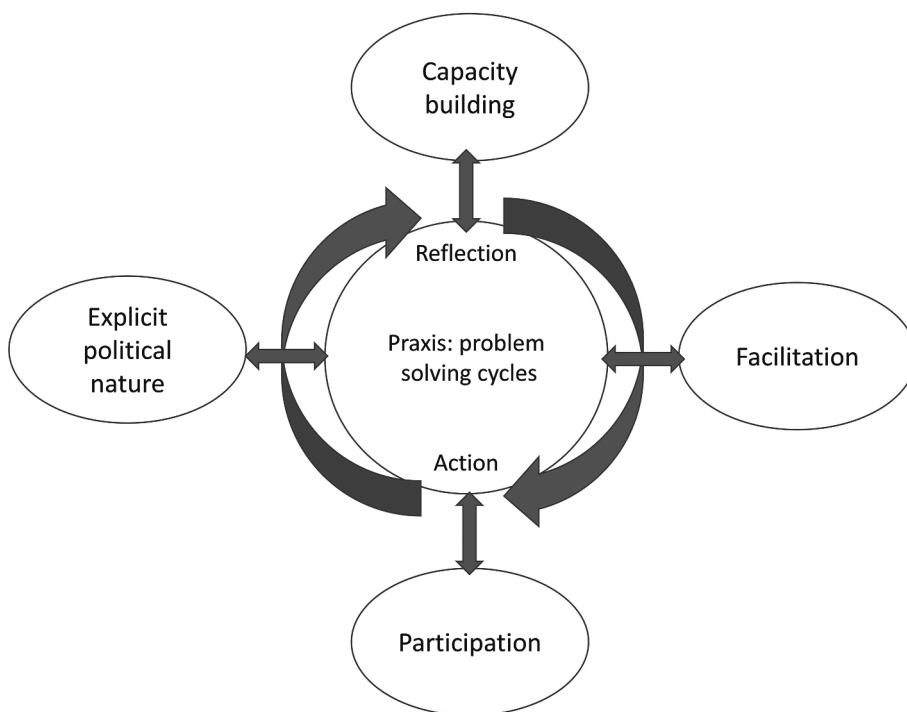
We must then reformulate territorial development accordingly as “the process of mobilisation and participation of different biological actors in which they discuss and agree on the strategies that can guide individual as well as collective behaviour”. The challenge posed by this definition lies in articulating the agency of non-humans in territorial development. We are aware that we do not have the methods to do this but making this need explicit might be the first step in developing them.

5. Revitalising action research in the face of climate change

Our paper revisits the core concepts that sustain action research for territorial development. Having addressed *development* and *territory* in the previous sections, we now focus on *action research*.

In Larrea and Costamagna (2023), we shared features of ARTD that we felt could be useful for helping territories respond to climate change, which are synthesised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Elements of action research that can help generate transformation processes in response to the climate emergency



Source: Larrea and Costamagna (2023).

In the dialogue process with colleagues, nonetheless, we have focused not on what we already have but rather on what we do not have or what needs to be reinforced in our practices to combat climate change effectively through action research. The following are five features that ARTD must consider:

5.1. Justice as a central feature of ARTD

The ARTD community includes researchers from the North (Basque Country, Spain, and Norway) and the South (Argentina). Tensions between the South and North, resistance to

Eurocentrism, and discussions of coloniality have been part of our development as an action research community. The question that emerged when rethinking ARTD was: How can we help avoid a new wave of injustice amid the transformations we face?

In her paper in this issue, Malida Mookén reminds us that “the burden and impacts of climate change, characterized by more severe weather events and disease outbreaks, exacerbated food insecurity, water insecurity, displacement, identity loss, illness, and mortality in different contexts, continue to be disproportionately felt by vulnerable communities and populations who are already discriminated against on the bases of intersecting structures of power not limited to race, age, class, ethnicity, gender, migratory status, religion, spirituality, nationality, and language”. Albuquerque (2024) adds that it is time for the economies of the North to cut back in favour of a fair and sustainable reorganisation of the world economic system that allows the Global South not to give up on its aspirations to meet its basic needs.

Meanwhile, Danilo Streck and Carolina Schenatto da Rosa invite us to reflect on this in a very provocative way in their position paper in this issue, using the words of Leonardo Boff to ask: “Is a banker worth more than a street garbageman?” Boff (2023, p. 99).

When discussing how ARTD can contribute to justice, the concept of epistemic justice has gained centrality. ARTD is essentially a process of cogenerating new transformative knowledge. Therefore, ensuring justice in the generation of knowledge, or epistemic justice, is paramount in our processes (see Malida Mookén’s position paper in this issue).

Mookén helps us understand that ARTD is not exempt from the paradigms that consider certain types of knowledge (European) higher and others (the rest) lower. We are influenced by the dominant narratives surrounding indigenous perspectives and knowledge. Even though we recognise their relevance in overcoming anthropocentrism, they are still considered ancient or traditional compared to other knowledge labelled as scientific, modern, or advanced.

The critique of Eurocentrism is also something that challenges us. One of us, the authors, is embedded in a European action research context, while the other is engaged in a Latin American one. These differences and contradictions are at the core of the ARTD community, which is both difficult and advantageous when it comes to improving ARTD. To do this, we take the following questions from Mookén’s paper: Who participates/is excluded? Whose voices, knowledge, practices, methods, problems, problem definitions and solutions matter? Where, when, why, for what and for whom do we generate knowledge?

5.2. Transformative governance

One of the core concepts to understand how ARTD operates in the territory is collaborative governance. However, this concept and its practice have also been problematised in discussions over the last three years. One of the main contributions in this regard is Ainhoa Arrona’s position paper in this issue. Arrona contends that we have been able to generate new forms of collaborative governance, yet she also questions whether they are transformative enough to tackle the magnitude of climate change. Consequently, she proposes a transition from collaborative to transformative governance.

To help with this transition, Arrona underlines two key points. First, we must strengthen the critical dimension of ARTD, focusing more on facilitating the paradigm shift. Second, we must stop looking only at ourselves and start looking at others. Although ARTD includes the recognition of the other in its praxis, it is usually one that is close, a territorial other. It is time

to extend that recognition to more distant others, making them visible and considering how our actions, here and now, influence others, there and now, and here and later.

5.3. Widening the scope of governance from governments to social movements

Since its inception, ARTD has been practised with policymakers as the main stakeholders, which does not mean that we exclusively worked with them. Policymakers typically invited other territorial actors (firms, firm associations, development agencies, vocational training centres, technology centres, universities, etc.) to the process. The conceptualisation of ARTD has been based on this practice.

This gives us a privileged position to transform policymaking in the face of climate change. Nevertheless, the challenge at hand is too large and complex for policymakers and their usual collaborators to deal with alone.

Igor Ahedo, Izaro Gorostidi, and Andere Ormazabal elaborate on this critique in their position paper in this issue. They also work in the Basque Country but have a different tradition of action research: participatory action research (PAR). Consequently, although they collaborate with governments as well, their core stakeholders are social movements.

In this context, they describe how governments and social movements have danced separate choreographies up until now, but climate change demands they learn to dance together and, if not together, at least rhythmically. They also suggest that action research can be the tempo for that choreography and that action researchers can facilitate the encompassing process. In ARTD, we take this as a stimulating invitation to play a new role. It is also an invitation for action researchers from different traditions to collaborate, which is the proposal made by Davydd Greenwood in his position paper in this issue.

5.4. Integrating the transformative drive of emotions

Since its inception in 2008, ARTD has developed primarily in a rational sphere, meaning that dialogue has basically focused on rational arguments and decisions. Although we have always conceptually recognised the relevance of emotions, we have had enormous difficulty making our bodies and emotions part of the process in practice. This started slowly changing when our research environment met Hilary Bradbury and the Action Research + community.

That is why Hilary has also been part of this critical revision of our practice, and we invited her to specifically help us reflect on the role of emotions in facing climate change. She is the author of another position paper in this issue, which we believe is relevant not only for ARTD but for any other AR tradition and community.

Hilary invites us to consider that, in this moment of ecosocial crisis, emotions such as anger at injustice and hope for a better future can lead us to greater awareness of interdependency and, in turn, to move towards more supportive ways of working and living.

The ARTD community is slowly gaining awareness that, as she contends, minimising and ignoring emotions are not accidental but rather a consequence of the intellectual Cartesian culture we have inherited. Our challenge now is to integrate emotions into our processes constructively, given that “stakeholders, when enabled to bring more of their emotionally

informed experience to a learning endeavor, by integrating emotional truths (such as concern for more than human beings), they are empowered to invest more fully in the outcome” (Bradbury in this issue).

This author has also provoked us by saying that “many devote whole lifetimes to seeking distraction from their own experience” and that “learning, attuned to embodied information – sensation constructed as emotion – may prepare an inner world for embracing external complexity”. These contributions prompt two questions for the ARTD community: Have we, as practitioners of ARTD, distracted ourselves from our own experiences, bodies and emotions? How does that hinder our ability to embrace the complexity of climate change?

6. ARTD must facilitate policies, but which ones?

ARTD has, up to now, focused on economic development and innovation policies, with processes related to social or educational policies. We are aware that climate change requires systemic approaches. However, the question now emerges: Which policies will most effectively combat climate change? Where should we focus our efforts?

Navarro (2024) classifies policies related to climate change into two large groups: (a) those for technical improvement, efficiency, or green growth (pragmatic, easy, and quick to operationalise), which are often based on the belief that growth and sustainability can be made compatible; and (b) those oriented to changing consumption patterns and lifestyles, connected to sufficiency or degrowth. These policies pose more challenges to change in the short term, given their fragmented nature, limited theoretical and empirical foundation, and the fact they are more revolutionary of the system, all of which make it difficult to gain support from citizens and, consequently, from governments.

It is important that the ARTD community becomes familiar with these policies, a few of which are still to be defined. In this regard, ARTD can serve as a methodology for policymakers to envision these new policies. We also believe it is not about choosing one type of policy over another since all of them will be necessary for the profound transformations needed to solve the problem. Furthermore, among the different action research approaches, there are communities and methodologies located in different positions on this spectrum. Using sociotechnical approaches can maximise the positive social impact of technological innovations, whereas emancipatory methodologies can reinforce transformations of capitalism’s production and consumption patterns and, thus, of our lifestyle.

Estensoro and Zabaleta (2024) complement this perspective by pointing out three areas where ARTD can contribute to helping governments and public administration prepare for this new generation of policies through the following:

- a) Assisting policymakers in directly involving citizens in cogeneration processes that facilitate attitudinal change simultaneously in individual and collective dimensions.
- b) Facilitating organisational changes within governments and public administration entities to overcome excessive hierarchisation, departmentalisation and functioning in silos, mistrust and power relations.
- c) Helping develop capacities through technical and political teams so that they can adequately combine expert knowledge with transversal capabilities.

Olaizola (2024) argues for the need to maximise connections between policies at multiple levels, using the connection between the European Green Deal and national, regional and local policies to illustrate this point. Meanwhile, Espinel Navas and Jurado (2024) stress the need for policies that consider territory as a whole, avoiding the separation of urban and rural areas.

Final reflection

Our final reflection after the three-year process, during which we articulated the twelve principles presented at the beginning of this position paper, is that there exists significant potential in the collaboration among action researchers of different traditions to enhance the relevance of action research in addressing climate change.

In this specific process, those of us practising action research for territorial development (ARTD) have collaborated with action researchers with experience in the following: Industrial Democracy; Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the legacy of Paulo Freire; Feminist Decolonial Action Research (FDAR); and Action Research for Transformations (ART). We have learnt that what we share is much stronger than what makes us different, and simultaneously, our differences are our main strength in helping each other improve our practices. We feel grateful to all participants in the process and, in this case, to the contributors to this special issue.

In his position paper in this issue, Davydd Greenwood asserts that action researchers from the South and the North, “having warned each other off our respective “territories”, we have made it difficult for action researchers in both areas to learn from and support one another”. This special issue is based on an experiment that seeks to generate dialogue between action researchers in the North and South. We hope that the collaboration has been fruitful for all.

Finally, we are aware that this is only the beginning of a long journey of transformation, or at least that is our desire. We also hope that our reflection is useful for all those readers who share our initial concerns, and our desire to do something to make a change.

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