

# Action Research and socio-environmental justice: decolonizing perspectives for a global responsibility

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But what is man,  
what is there under the name:  
a geography?  
a metaphysical being?  
a fable without  
a sign that dismantles it?  
[...]  
How much is man worth?  
Less, more than his weight?  
Today more than yesterday?  
Is he worth less, if old?  
Is he worth less, if dead?  
One less than the other,  
if the value of man  
Is a measure of man?  
(Carlos Drummond de Andrade)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The text explores the relationship between socio-environmental justice and action research, arguing that the global ecological crisis demands a reassessment of our practices and values. It proposes the idea of an “ethics of the fair measure” as a means to achieve balance between human needs and the planet’s limits. Through an analysis of various philosophical and cultural traditions, it discusses the challenges and implications of socio-environmental justice for the theory and practice of action research, emphasizing the dimensions of interdependence, mutuality, and co-responsibility. As a conclusion, it highlights the need to decolonize the concept of humanity and incorporate perspectives that consider nature as a living and participatory organism into research methodology.

**Key words:** Socio-environmental justice, sustainability, action research, interdependence, decolonization, ethics of the fair measure.

## La investigación-acción y la justicia socioambiental: perspectivas descolonizadoras para una responsabilidad global

**Resumen:** El texto explora la relación entre la justicia socioambiental y la investigación-acción, argumentando que la crisis ecológica global exige una reevaluación de nuestras prácticas y valores. Propone la idea de una “ética de la justa medida” como un medio para lograr un equilibrio entre las necesidades humanas y los límites del planeta. A través de un análisis de diversas tradiciones filosóficas y culturales, discute los desafíos e implicaciones de la justicia socioambiental para la teoría y práctica de la investigación-acción, enfatizando las

1 In the original: “Mas que coisa é homem,/que há sob o nome:/uma geografia?/um ser metafísico?/uma fábula sem/signo que a desmonte?/[...]/Quanto vale o homem?/Menos, mais que o peso?/Hoje mais que ontem?/Vale menos, velho?/Vale menos, morto?/Menos um que outro,/se o valor do homem/é medida de homem?”

dimensiones de interdependencia, mutualidad y co-responsabilidad. Como conclusión, destaca la necesidad de descolonizar el concepto de humanidad e incorporar perspectivas que consideren la naturaleza como un organismo vivo y participativo en la metodología de investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Justicia socioambiental, sostenibilidad, investigación-acción, interdependencia, descolonización, ética de la justa medida.

## Introduction

“Is a banker worth more than a street garbageman?”<sup>2</sup>, provokes Leonardo Boff (2023, p. 99), when he reflects on the meaning of human wealth and concludes that this is more related to “fair balance” than to the accumulation of goods. Fair balance means self-control, self-limit; it means exercising sensible reason. In a world increasingly faced with climate challenges and social inequalities, how can finding the fair balance help us understand the sense of socio-environmental justice?

This concept emerges as a key to understanding and responding to the various crises humanity faces. The right balance suggests that we must seek harmony between human needs and the limits of the Earth. This means rethinking our consumption and production patterns, our economic policies, and our cultural values. In this article, we look for examples of the relationship between humanity and justice in some philosophical and cultural traditions, and the implications for action research. We found this approach especially relevant in the context of the current ecological crisis, where the need for justice that transcends human boundaries and includes the earth and all living beings is becoming increasingly urgent.

The text is structured in four parts, each organized around a problematizing question. In “Humanity or humanities? Can we fit our human diversity into one concept, into one idea?”, we seek to exemplify how different cultures and philosophical traditions conceive humanity. In the second part, “What do we mean by socio-environmental justice?”, we turn our gaze to the anthropocentric and colonial paradigm that has shaped the Western understanding of humanity, addressing how modernity, along with coloniality, created a view of humanity which promoted various forms of injustice and inequality. In the third part, “What does the concept of socio-environmental justice add to the idea of humanity?”, the focus is on the conception of socio-environmental justice. Here, we explore how the concept includes not only human relationships, but also our relationship with the environment and argue that, in order to achieve true socio-environmental justice, it is necessary to recognize the interdependence between all aspects of life, and act according to principles of mutuality, co-responsibility, and sustainability. In the fourth part, “What are the challenges for action research?”, we seek to identify some implications for the theory and practice of action research, both in the sense of corroborating what already exists in terms of the proposed reflection and pointing out emerging needs.

Through this analysis, we propose that socio-environmental justice is an important key to understanding and responding to the complex challenges of our time, respectively, to guide research practices. By integrating the multiple dimensions of humanity, this expanded concept

2 In the original: “Um banqueiro vale mais do que um cuidador de rua?”.

of justice offers a path to a more harmonious and equitable coexistence, not only between human beings, but between humanity and the planet as a whole.

## ¿Humanity or humanities? Can we fit our human diversity into a concept, into an idea?

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1983), a leading figure of the Brazilian Modernist Movement, wrote some “Speculations on the word Man” that invite us to a deep reflection on the essence and value of the human being. By questioning “how much man is worth,” the poet helps us rehearse some possible answers to the questions in this subchapter. Drummond, in his questions, suggests that trying to define the human being in absolute terms, in a concept or idea, is a fruitless exercise. Would it be possible, or even desirable, to simplify humanity to a single idea or concept?

The poem shows humanity as a concept as broad as it is complex, which brings with it a series of questions about its essence and meaning. “Speculations” are not just rhetorical matters; they provoke reflections from diverse philosophical traditions, analyzing human identity from multiple perspectives, encompassing the dimension of rationality and reflexivity; interiority and spirituality; autonomy and freedom; of ancestry and collectivity; of balance and generationality.

We know that the anthropocentric paradigm that was consolidated with European colonization throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has a reductionist vision of the human and humanity. Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism, as modernity and coloniality are, as Quijano (2000) put it, two sides of the same coin. Our understanding of the world and ourselves, as well as our relationship to life in general, was built within a specific pattern of global power, which is basically a pattern of domination, exploitation, and conflict. The idea of race produced a division in the sense of humanity, imposing that some people and cultures were superior to others. The coloniality of power profoundly affects the understanding of who is considered “human” and who is not, relegating many to a position of sub-humanity.

The modern social contract, even in Rousseau’s (2010) communitarian version, is today perceived as too limited to encompass the complexity of society. Carole Pateman (1988) points out that social contract theories have historically excluded women and perpetuated the notion of an essentially masculine pact. This contract, written by and for men, addresses freedom and equality in an unequal way, as it is sustained by a sexual contract, reinforcing patriarchal power structures. It is a written contract within the pattern of colonial power and, therefore, it is also a racial contract (Mills, 1997). For Charles W. Mills, the social contract does not recognize racism as a structuring condition of modern societies, and thus classical theories of the social contract fail to address how the invention of race influences power relations and social and political structures over the centuries.

This reduced sense of humanity is also closed in on itself. This is the critique of Michael Serres (1995), who argues that traditional notions of social contract are limited to an anthropocentric perspective, which often places human beings above or outside of nature and ignores the interconnectedness and interdependence of all systems. The “natural contract” proposes a new environmental ethic, in which preservation and respect for the earth are

central. Serres argues that the ecological crisis demands a fundamental overhaul of how we see and interact with the environment.

The current crisis of civilization poses the challenge of seeking alternatives and forgotten or silenced places, including ways of transmitting and producing knowledge relevant to the flourishing of life<sup>3</sup>. In South America, especially in the Andean regions, Pachamama (Mother Earth) is incorporated as part of the sense of humanity, symbolizing the deep relationship between humanity and nature present in indigenous cultures. In the Aymara and Quechua traditions, it is not God who creates the earth and humanity, it is Mother Earth, a goddess, who creates life and all that exists. She is intimately linked to the concept of Sumak Kawsay, a concept that refers to the construction of a full life and a “well-being”; that is, it refers to the search for balance between all forms of existence, involving the social, cultural, economic, environmental, epistemological, and political dimensions, which are articulated as an inter-related whole (Simbaña, 2019). This interconnection between humanity and nature is also present in Mayan culture. The “Popol Vuh”, a text that narrates, among other things, the creation of humanity, says that human beings were made from corn; that is, they were made of nature, of that which feeds them (Barbosa, 2019). Indigenous traditions thus seem to reflect a more integrated and less human-centered vision.

Even within a perception of correlation and interdependence, the syncretism present in Afro-Brazilian traditions promotes a synthesis of different perspectives of spirituality. In these cultures, the vision of humanity is intrinsically linked to a larger community of beings, whether human, divine, or nature. Beyond the relationship with the sacred and with the community, Candomblé and Umbanda, for example, represent a process of humanization, reconnection, respect, and resistance in the face of the oppressions of coloniality and slavery (Beniste, 1997). Emerging from a context of profound violence and oppression, man’s sense of humanity and relationship with creation are based on interdependence, care, and respect.

Are we witnessing the emergence of a new contract, an “integral contract”, capable of decolonizing our conception of the world and producing a common sense of humanity and justice? Would that be a desirable and necessary Quixotism? Is it possible to propose a conception of humanity that, although singular, is not exclusive or universalist? Humanity in the singular is more a common search for who we are than the attempt to find substantive qualities inherent in all of us. Quixotism, here, is a metaphor that symbolizes the utopian attempt to reach a harmonious and just balance between technological advances, human dignity, social justice, and environmental sustainability. This contract would be a living, evolving document, capable of adapting as new understandings emerge, particularly in response to the challenges posed by technology and environmental issues.

Inspired by Drummond de Andrade, we propose these brief “speculations around the word humanity”, with the aim of arguing that more than an idea, humanity is a permanent construction, it is a practice of (de)coloniality, where the search for equity and sustainability becomes an integral part of our understanding and practice of humanity. If we began this subchapter with the question “humanity or humanities?”, we now close it with the question “justice or justices? Can we fit the multiple conceptions of justice into one concept, one idea?”

3 According to Carlos A. Torres (2023), “life flourishing” is a concept that has been developed as an alternative (or a new theoretical-epistemological interpretation) to the idea of sustainable development with an emphasis on productivity and growth. Human flourishing or the flourishing of life, more than a conceptual syllogism or a utopia, is a metaphor that helps us understand what it means to educate for global citizenship and the intrinsic relationship between humanity and the environment.

## What do we mean by socio-environmental justice?

Mario Vargas Llosa (2013), Peruvian poet, already said that (in)justice begins with the freedom of all, that is, it is not a pre-existing reality, it is not “born” with humanity. And there are many (in)justices that emerge from the struggles for freedom in an anthropocentric and individualistic perspective. When we examine our history, one of the points of convergence that we find in the most diverse religions is that justice is not portrayed as an inherent element in the creation of the world.

Looking at Judeo-Christian philosophy, the need for justice stems from “original sin,” from free will. In this logic, justice is related to reparation, to the reconstruction of the perfect world created by God (Keller, 2010). There is an emphasis on the importance of social justice, compassion, and care for others. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, argue that justice must be grounded in love and compassion (*caritas*). This perspective emphasizes that true justice is guided by love for God and care for others. The emphasis on inner morality and justice as a matter of personal and social ethics transcends Christianity, being present in various philosophical and religious traditions around the world.

Beyond the theological dimension, the notion that justice and ethics begin with the individual and his or her inner choices has spanned centuries, since ancient Greece. In Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism, there is a strong emphasis on inner morality and personal virtue. Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle discussed the idea that a good and just life is achieved through the development of character and the understanding of virtue (Taylor, 1997).

Humanist philosophy integrates many of the Christian principles, emphasizing the importance of morality, education, and the development of individual character for building a sense of justice. Thomas More’s “*Utopia*” (2018), for example, describes a society where property and wealth are collectivized. Beyond social inequalities, More proposes that the notion of justice be expanded to political participation, to a more humanitarian legal system, and to an education focused on moral values, virtues and a sense of communitarian responsibility, since these are the foundations of social justice.

The understanding of the existence of natural rights and justice as a fundamental condition of humanity resonated in Enlightenment thought. Characterized by the call to reason, the questioning of dogma, and the critique of established institutions, the Enlightenment profoundly shaped contemporary notions of justice, freedom, and human rights. In writing the “*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*,” Rousseau (2011), for example, identifies two main types of inequality (injustice): natural and moral or political. Natural inequality refers to the innate physical and mental differences between individuals, which Rousseau considers inevitable and inherent in the human condition. These differences would not, in themselves, be sources of injustice. On the other hand, moral or political inequality is the result of social relations and power structures and, therefore, can produce significant injustices within society.

In this context, how can society promote justice? Through the social contract. But, as argued above, this covenant has its limitations and is therefore also a way of (re)producing injustices. This is what Pateman, Mills and Serres show us, arguing that the traditional social contract is masculine, white and anthropocentric. This contract, paradoxically, has supported the (re)production of a number of inequalities by excluding indigenous and African peoples,

women and land, as a whole. So what are the injustices that sustain this pact? We list at least seven: Sexual and gender injustice, racial injustice, social injustice, cognitive injustice, economic injustice, environmental injustice, and age injustice.

This means that, like the notion of humanity, justice is not singular and is also associated with a set of pacts that has been demanded by society. However, there is one common element between the traditions presented so far, whether they are religious or secular perspectives: the notion that justice and ethics traditionally centered on the individual and their internal choices, are becoming more collective.

In the twentieth century, this search for balance has resonated in discourses around the “care of the common home”. This metaphor has been highlighted in contemporary discussions about justice and sustainability, representing a more holistic and integrated approach. Popularized in part by Pope Francis’ encyclical “*Laudato Si*,” the common home draws attention to the collective responsibility in caring for our planet, representing not only the interconnectedness among human beings, but also the interdependence between social justice, environmental justice, and ethics in the understanding and maintenance of humanity.

More than a metaphor, caring for our common home is “a call for a new ethical and practical approach” (Siqueira, 2020), an invitation to the struggle for socio-environmental justice. But what is socio-environmental justice? We regard socio-environmental justice as a key to understanding the multiple forms of justice demanded by humanity. It allows us to understand concepts such as interdependence, reciprocity, mutuality, complementarity, co-responsibility and sustainability beyond the relationship between humans; and, in doing so, it invites us to leave the anthropocene phase (Boff, 2023).

From socio-environmental justice emerges a new interpretation of humanity: we “are the Earth itself that, at an advanced moment of its complexity, began to feel, think, love, care and venerate. That’s when we burst in as man and woman”<sup>4</sup>(Boff, 2023, p.40). And, because it is the Earth itself, we share the same rights with it. What are these rights? We look for the answer in the Earth Charter: a) the eradication of poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative; b) the protection of the most vulnerable groups in society; c) the protection of the environment; d) respect for the equality and dignity of all beings; e) intergenerational responsibility.

In this perspective, socio-environmental justice can be understood as “just and fair” (Boff, 2023), that is, it is what makes the comprehensive pact we talked about in the previous subchapter viable in practice. “The one who lives in a just and fair perspective knows how to impose limits on himself, either in relation to others, or in relation to nature”<sup>5</sup>, said Leonardo Boff (2023, p.111) when explaining that this cardinal virtue has accompanied humanity throughout its development. From the Egyptian goddess Maat to the ethics of Aristotle, from Midas to Marx, it is the just and fair perspective that gives cohesion to society; and meaning to sustainability. This cardinal virtue, in turn, needs to be translated into public policies at the local, national and international levels that support this cardinal virtue of living the just and fair perspective as a collective requirement.

4 In the original: “somos a própria Terra que, num momento avançado de sua complexidade, começou a sentir, a pensar, a amar, a cuidar e a venerar. Foi então que irrompemos como homem e mulher”.

5 In the original: “Vive a justa medida aquele que sabe impor limites a ele mesmo, seja em relação aos outros, seja em relação a natureza”.

## What does the concept of socio-environmental justice add to the idea of humanity?

What, then, would be the just and fair measure of man's worth? Socio-environmental justice reminds us that there is only one just and fair measure for life on Earth: the health of the planet (Boff, 2010; 2023). This vision reflects the idea that socio-environmental justice is not just about protecting the environment, but recognizing the ecological crisis as a crisis of values, where the unbridled exploitation of natural resources and lack of responsibility towards life are symptoms of a deeper flaw in the way humanity understands itself. They are symptoms of a paradigmatic crisis that cannot be solved by technological or political changes alone, without a fundamental transformation of the values and ethics that guide the interactions between humanity and planetarity.

Leonardo Boff (2008) calls this transformation "ethics of life". It is an ethic of possibilities, because life is always a process of becoming, which is never complete or finished. This conception is linked to education and liberation, suggesting that human beings have the capacity and responsibility to transform their own lives and the world around them. In "Ethics of Life", Boff (2008) presents a vision of the world where life is a constant process of becoming, reflecting an ethics of possibilities and transformation.

This view finds significant parallels in Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, particularly in his conception of the human being as an "unfinished being." In the ethics of life, education is not just a process of knowledge transmission, but an act of creation and recreation. Freire (1970) argues that the dynamics of incompleteness is crucial to understanding oppression and seeking liberation – and, therefore, is a path for the construction of socio-environmental justice. In the Freirean perspective, it is possible to understand this justice as an action of liberation and a critical awakening for awareness. Freire (1970, p.49) says that liberation is a painful and collective childbirth that "cannot be performed by others. I can only be liberated with others"<sup>6</sup>.

The metaphor of the birth for an ethic of life highlights a process which both humanity and the Earth are going through. This is what Boff (2021) argues when talking about the "painful childbirth of Mother Earth". The unprecedented environmental crisis demands the birth of a new era – the "ecozoic era" (Boff, 2023). The delivery of Mother Earth, "as an expression of a new stage to be walked through by all, this time, in harmony with nature [...]" (Boff, 2021, p. 310)<sup>7</sup>, symbolizes hope in overcoming the end of the world.

There are, in this conception, two important elements for socio-environmental justice: hope as a "verb to hope" (Freire, 1992); and the end of the world as a concrete reality (Krenak, 2019). "Esperança" ("Hoping") is not a passive feeling or naive optimism; on the contrary, it is an action, a concrete initiative for social transformation that promotes solidarity and collaboration. Hope, as a life force of socio-environmental justice, presupposes a collective approach, where different groups, communities and nations work together to find solutions that benefit both people and the planet. Hope is also the awareness that the "end of the world" is not necessarily a cataclysmic event, but a reality lived by those whom Freire (1970) calls "oppressed".

6 In the original: "não pode ser realizado por outros. Eu só posso ser libertado com os outros".

7 In the original: "como expressão de uma nova etapa a ser percorrida por todos, desta vez, em harmonia com a natureza [...]".

Socio-environmental justice expands the traditional concept of humanity by incorporating the idea that life in its entirety – and not just human existence – is central to our understanding of what it means to be human. This perspective recognizes that humans are only one part of a larger, interdependent, and dynamic ecosystem, where all forms of life have intrinsic value and are intrinsically connected. In the context of socio-environmental justice, humanizing implies expanding the struggle against oppression and the search for liberation to include the relationship of the human being with the environment. It means cultivating a sense of responsibility and understanding that the exploitation of the Earth and environmental degradation are forms of dehumanization, because they show a lack of respect for life in all its forms, whether they are already on the planet or those that will come.

## What are the challenges for action research?

### A more comprehensive notion of context

Since its beginnings action research has been based on the premises to transform life conditions of communities and organizations through direct action of the subjects implicated in given situation regarded as problematic. Situations varied from working life conditions to development of production cooperatives, according to the regional, social, economic, and political context. Regardless of the specific context, action research has always been identified as a collective transforming action-reflection process, involving professional researchers and stakeholders as co-participants with shared responsibilities.

While sharing the critique of positivistic scientific approach by bringing into play intersubjectivity as a constitutive element in action research, there was – and still is – the clear predominance of an anthropocentric view of reality. When describing the context, action research is usually concerned with socio-economic, historical, and cultural aspects, only rarely including considerations on the natural environment. When planning a school with the community, why not also ask the question – following the Andean concept of nature as having rights – about the type of institution that the natural environment will support or will be aided by the school for the fair and just equilibrium above mentioned in our reflection?

To understand this part of the context, the view of specialists on ecology and statistical data is certainly important. But it can be complemented with very simple exercises in the research process. Peter Reason tells us that he used to take his MSc students to the wilderness of the river Dart to experience “deep ecology”, to understand “how we grasp our participation in the world”. Students experienced joy and awe in face of the more-than-human world; the delicate balance between chaos and order; the interconnectedness of all living beings; the feeling of homecoming; living the moment and eternity. He then remarks that these are aesthetic qualities:

We fully grasp our participation in the world through our appreciation of beauty; we open our eyes to frost on the ground, the buds on a tree, and we are struck by wonder. Through awe, wonder and beauty we can experience our sense of belonging, that we are part of the whole (Reason, 2002, p. 303)

One of us had a similar experience when discussing guidelines for Education for Sustainable Development at a UNESCO meeting that was hosted in a small farm in Germany. In one of the

sessions the coordinator asked participants to leave the room and interact with a non-human living being. This silent dialogue can bring forth strong and relevant thoughts and feelings that expand our understanding of context.

## The ethics of life as principle

Action research is associated with ethics. The ethical stance may find expression in different values, according to the needs and challenges of a situation or region. In the article “Action Research and Minority Problems” (Lewin, 1946, p. 36), a milestone in action research, Kurt Lewin (1946, p.37) asks questions that point to the inherently ethical nature of action research: “When, where, and by whom should social research be done?”. In this article he is concerned with minority problems, which he appropriately identifies as majority problems, and with the future of democracy.

The European tradition of industrial democracy, which has its roots in the Tavistock Institute, and from there expanded to Scandinavia, takes up the concern expressed by Lewin. Werner Fricke (2011) identifies five values inherent in this tradition:

1. Action research is about democracy (...) and participation, esp. democratic participation.
2. Action research is about change (...) as bottom-up change.
3. Action research is research, in which (...) all participating in the research process have the chance to take part.
4. Action research is dialogical.
5. Action research is about enhancing innovative qualification of all participants, especially those who have been living/working in the “culture of silence” (Freire) (Fricke, 2011, p. 142)

The Latin American tradition develops within a political milieu where, one hand, we have authoritarian military regimes in the middle of the last century, and on the other hand, the emergence of strong social movements that claim for social justice. In this context, the struggle for democracy passes through the organization of people secularly excluded not only from participation in decisions, but from the basic conditions for life with dignity. Action research, related to social justice, meant the conjugation of three intertwined processes: a) conscientization, in Freire’s expression, about the oppressive situation; b) organization through participation and solidarity; c) involvement in change process, from demanding public policies to organizing cooperatives. (Sobottka, 2018)

We suggest that these values come together in what we have identified as an ethics of life, meaning respect, love, and care for human and non-human life. There is, of course, a special responsibility for the part of nature that are we, the humans. As phrased by Leonardo Boff:

To care for life, to expand life, to engage in communion and synergy with the entire chain of life, and to celebrate life: this is the meaning of human beings’ existence on Earth, also understood as Gaia, a living superorganism, and we humans as the part of Gaia that feels, thinks, loves, speaks, and venerates. (Boff, 2021, p. 196)<sup>8</sup>

8 Original: “Cuidar da vida, fazer expandir a vida, entrar em comunhão e sinergia com toda a cadeia de vida e celebrar a vida: eis o sentido do viver dos seres humanos sobre a Terra, também entendida como Gaia, super-organismo vivo e nós humanos como a porção de Gaia que sente, pensa, ama, fala e venera”.

Action research is thus a place of encounter of people with different values, and different forms of languages to pronounce their world. This, of course, requires leaving aside academic arrogance, stepping down from the “scientific” pedestal, and learning humility, even when we think being on the right side of history. Enrique Dussel reminds us that as the “good” is finite, there is no perfect “good.” “Those who ‘install’ themselves in the power of the ‘good’ are already bad, and the actual good already turned out to be ‘no-good.’” (Dussel, 2000, p. 571) Action research is carried out in history with its contradictions and tensions, achievements and defeats, sorrows and joys.

## Summing up

In the Introduction we have asked four questions to guide our reflection, starting with the question about our self-understanding of humanity. The assumption of this question in the context of reflection on action research is that the starting point of our investigative action starts from the way we position ourselves in the world and with the world. The second paragraph of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written more than 5 decades ago, poses a concern that has since assumed even more forceful proportions about our place in the world: “Once again, men, challenged by the dramatic nature of the current time, pose themselves as a problem. They discover that they know little about themselves, their ‘place in the cosmos’, and are restless to know more.” (Freire, 1970, p. 16) <sup>9</sup>.

We start from there to the question about socio-environmental justice, which, as we argue, allows us to integrate the theme of environmental sustainability and the set of social problems, from growing inequality to migration, prejudice and wars. The idea of socio-environmental justice challenges us to conceive citizenship beyond the borders of national states, because it reveals geographical and political interconnections that make us realize that we inhabit the same “common home” and share the same destiny. Using a lesson from Liberation Theology, salvation is a collective act that takes place in history. Action research can be seen as a movement that reinforces this perception of interconnectedness, as already expressed by Kurt Lewin in the aforementioned article: “The last point I would like to mention concerns the relationship between the local, the national, and the international. No one working in the field of intergroup relations can be blind to the fact that we live today in one world” (Lewin, 1946, 45). It is our conviction that action research has the potential to overcome today’s blindness, as it had in the time of Lewin.

When we asked about the implications of the notion of socio-environmental justice for our understanding of humanity, we were led to ethical considerations about the paradigmatic crisis or civilizational crisis – understood as the combination of crises – in which we find ourselves. The fact that we recognize ourselves as part of a complex ecosystem requires that action research has a look of totality at reality. Once again, we turn to Kurt Lewin (1946), who uses the symphony metaphor to characterize the need for an inter or transdisciplinary look at the real problems of communities and organizations. Symphony means that the willingness to

9 Original: Mais uma vez os homens, desafiados pela dramaticidade da hora atual, se propõem, a si mesmos, como problema. Descubrem que pouco sabem de si, de seu “posto no cosmos”, e se inquietam por saber mais.

act together must be accompanied by the willingness to listen to the other to produce chords with meaning, even if sometimes dissonant.

Finally, we tried to synthesize some challenges for action research. We highlight two: the need to broaden our understanding of context by giving more attention to non-human life, in the sense that it could be summarized in the search for an ethics of life as a meeting point among action research practices. Human life takes place in the provisional nature of history, always as a possibility. But it is also part of the fabric woven by the many threads that make up what we mean by life. With the epigraph we began by asking about who or what, after all, we are. We can also end with Carlos Drummond de Andrade when he asks: “What miracle is man?” and amend: What miracle is life? Also: What do we do to make this miracle flourish?

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