

Special Issue: Working with Action Research for Sustainable and Regenerative Environments, Communities, and Organizations: Wicked Problems Demand Action

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Número especial: Trabajando con la investigación-acción para entornos, comunidades y organizaciones sostenibles y regenerativas: Problemas complejos exigen acción

At a global scale, we are grappling with an eco-social crisis where both “eco” and “social” represent broader issues. “Eco” encompasses climate change, depletion of natural resources, species extinction, pollution, and rising sea levels. “Social” includes psychological, interpersonal, political, and economic inequalities, as well as issues of social and gender justice. We face “wicked problems”—complex challenges without straightforward solutions. The ecological and social crises are deeply intertwined, necessitating research that integrates both perspectives to conceptualize sustainable ideas, projects, and initiatives.

Environmental destruction and resource exploitation occur systematically, through deforestation, soil degradation, overfishing, and more. Our environment suffers from pollution, CO₂ emissions, global warming, forest fires, floods, droughts, melting ice, oceanic plastic pollution, and biodiversity loss. Continuing this path will lead to ecosystem collapse, followed by societal collapse marked by rising inequality, human suffering, conflicts, wars, and increased refugee flows.

Our ecosystems are not the only ones suffering. Socially, people face increasing inequality and dissatisfaction. The neoliberal economic model, characterized by untamed growth and short-term profit, exacerbates global inequality and pressures individuals. Many feel exploited at work, facing high demands and performance pressures ultimately leading to stress, burnout, and depression. Time for personal relationships is scarce, affecting not only the elderly but also children and young people, who increasingly suffer from alienation and loneliness.

As Habermas (1987) noted, our lifeworld has been colonized by the systems world. Hartmut Rosa describes our era with terms like social acceleration and dynamic stabilization, driven not only by growth desires but also by fears of labour market exclusion and societal marginalization. How can we create sustainable and inclusive workplaces, organizations, and educational institutions addressing both the physical and social environment? The interconnected crises require us to rethink our relationships with each other, nature, and the ecologies we inhabit, and to reorganize our ways of living, producing, and consuming.

From an interrelated perspective, how can we alter human practices towards more regenerative and sustainable living, organizing, producing, and consuming to preserve and regenerate our nature, ecosystems, and communities? How can action researchers collaborate

with other researchers, practitioners, citizens, influencers, and decision-makers to create and implement sustainable solutions to these complex problems and drive eco-social change?

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of researchers collaborating with climate activists and practitioners. A notable example is Greta Thunberg's "The Climate Book," (2022) which brings together over 100 researchers from diverse fields to scientifically address the climate crisis and propose solutions to save our planet's future.

In this special issue, we have invited contributions that explore how action research can foster research and change, with action researchers partnering with practitioners to create positive social and environmental change through local action and community-based initiatives. We believe action research can contribute to critical reflexivity, multidisciplinary, and the inclusion of diverse voices in addressing global and local challenges, as well as to concrete actions for transformation.

The first article "Caring Action Research: Lessons Learned from Performing Research with(in) Care" by Britta Møller explores how care ethics can inform and enhance action research. Building on the work of Tronto and Noddings, Møller introduces Caring Action Research (CAR) as a framework that integrates relational responsibility, attentiveness, and ethical care into participatory inquiry. Drawing on an empirical study within Danish elderly care and vocational education, the article highlights key dynamics such as mutual recognition, negotiation of power relations, and collaborative design-based trials. CAR has emerged as a valuable approach to navigate complex professional and educational challenges, offering new perspectives on how care ethics can foster more inclusive and socially sustainable research practices. By positioning care at the heart of action research, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on ethical engagement, reflexivity, and the transformative potential of co-creative inquiry.

The second article in this special issue, titled "Working the Insider–Outsider Hyphen in Action Research for Sustainability: Tensions in Citizen-Led Multi-Stakeholder Forest Dialogues," is written by Eeva Houtbeckers. This article is rooted in ecofeminism and presents a dialogically based approach to action research for sustainability. The need to both protect, and use forests has resulted in intense political debates where citizens, according to the author, are underrepresented. The author initiated a citizen-led, multi-stakeholder forest movement, facilitating a series of "forest dialogues" over four years. The action research project involved various forest stakeholders and enabled discussions on sustainability, biodiversity, economy, and the future of forests in Finland. The article describes and discusses the process, tensions, challenges, and possibilities of engaging multiple stakeholders in forest policy debates. In relation to that, it also explores the facilitation of hyphen-spaces and the dual positioning of the action researcher as an insider-outsider. The article is based on the research question: What kinds of tensions are revealed by focusing on the insider–outsider hyphen in action research for sustainability?

The third article, by Karina Solsø, Emma Crewe, and Kiran Chauhan, titled "A neo-complexity orientation to action research: perspectives on unpredictability and ethics" argues that integrating ideas from neo-complexity sciences could enrich action research. They suggest distinguishing complexity-informed approaches that privilege control from those adopting radical open-endedness. The former often align with managerialist assumptions that deny the messiness and moral dimensions of living and working, whereas neo-complexity, according to the authors, aims to reemphasize the most intellectually, politically, and emotionally radical elements of complexity science: improvising into unpredictability, plurality,

and practice-based ethics. An example of an action research coalition involving Ethiopian, Mursi, and UK researchers illustrates what this means in practice.

The fourth article, “Action Research for the Development of Welfare” by us as guest editors of this special issue, Søren Frimann, Lone Hersted, and Ottar Ness, explains about the development of the Nordic Welfare model and explores how action research can contribute to developing welfare in a Nordic context. While this model is known for its commitment to equality, and social security, it is increasingly challenged by demographic shifts, rising social inequality, and economic pressures. In response, the authors argue that action research offers a valuable framework for democratic participation, dialogue, and co-creation to develop sustainable welfare solutions. By engaging citizens, organizations, and policymakers in collaborative problem-solving, action research moves beyond traditional top-down management approaches. Through case studies from Norway and Denmark, the article demonstrates how this approach can enhance organizational development, social sustainability, strengthen citizen involvement, and promote inclusive decision-making processes. The authors highlight the transformative potential of action research in shaping more adaptable, socially sustainable, and participatory structures for welfare.

The final contribution is an interview with Professor, Julie Borup Jensen, from Aalborg University in Denmark. Since Julie has recently joined the group of editors of IJAR, we decided to bring an interview with her to introduce her to the readers. The interview has the title “Our Bodies in Action Research: Senses, experience, and aesthetic awareness” and has been carried out by Danilo Streck and Lone Hersted.

Finally, as editors of this special issue, we wish to thank all the authors and the blind peer reviewers who have spent their precious time contributing to this issue. We would also like to emphasize that we do not necessarily agree with all the views expressed by the authors in this issue, but that we leave it to the individual reader to reflect further on the various contributions and possibly respond to them in future articles, so that the debate on action research can continue to develop.

References

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