

Introduction: Pushing boundaries to enhance the reach and scope of action research

Special Issue of the *International Journal of Action Research*

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In this special issue of the *International Journal of Action Research (IJAR)*, we bring together papers selected following our open call for contributions. The call focused on key topics discussed in the 7th IJAR Symposium, organised in October 2024, in collaboration with the Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (CRISES) of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Canada. The symposium was framed around three core themes: i) transforming higher education; ii) connecting and communicating beyond our projects; and, iii) decentralising research and moving boundaries. Discussions amongst three IJAR editors, who were part of the organising team, namely Isabel Heck and us two, Patricia Canto-Farachala and Malida Mooken, informed the choice of themes. We identified these based on our own experiences and what we observed more broadly as particular challenges or opportunities for action research.

Our overarching question for the symposium was how to enhance the reach of action research, as collaboration among different stakeholders and the integration of various sources and types of knowledge are crucial for taking action to address our intertwined societal and environmental crises. Together with two other colleagues, Baptiste Godrie (Université de Sherbrooke, Montreal) and Mathilde Courtemanche (UQAM), the symposium was organised as a combination of in-person sessions, for local participants in Montreal, and online sessions for international participants. We aimed to connect the knowledge and experiences of local and international action researchers. During the symposium, participants proposed epistemic disobedience, scaling out, democratising knowledge and knowing, and action research training and education as possible avenues for enhancing the reach and scope of action research. The deliberation on those themes inspired our call for papers for this special issue. The themes are wide-ranging, which is atypical for a special issue, but it is a deliberate choice made – to keep the call relatively open to show and reflect the diverse possibilities that might address the overarching question.

Unlike conventional research paradigms, action research has never been about conforming to tradition. The family of action research approaches, as we understand it, is grounded in the intention to transcend (cultural, geographical, disciplinary, ideological, ...) boundaries and to transform (learning, behaviours, action, societal problems...) through praxis, whilst holding space for the plurality and complexity of knowledge systems – so that humans and non-humans (rightly receiving more attention these days) flourish in respect, solidarity and dignity. Giving space to new and emerging action researchers, conceptual developments, and methodologies and methods, alongside more established ones, is a nec-

essary impetus for the action research field and community to continue to innovate and grow. The papers selected for this special issue reflect our appreciation of what action research is essentially about, and how it is evolving.

The first article, “Methodological perspectives on composite narrative cases in action research”, by Søren Frimann, Jan Rohwedder, Anne-Birgitte Nyhus Rohwedder and Deidre Le Fevre, proposes a methodological approach that **can strengthen the communicative reach, future-forming potential and participatory quality of action research beyond single-case studies**. The authors critically explore Composite Narrative Cases methodology as a way of distilling complex empirical material into accessible narratives, while preserving anonymity and practice-based relevance, highlighting methodological and ethical tensions related to power dynamics and validation.

The second article, by Aina Landsverk Hagen and Hilde Rønnaug Kitterød is titled “Towards scaling up, out and deep: Debriefing youth experiences of youth participatory action research and citizen social science”. The authors argue that youth encounter specific forms of epistemic injustice when invited to decision-making and participatory processes. Drawing from debriefing sessions with youth co-researchers based in Norway who have participated in numerous national and international Youth Participatory Action Research and Citizen Social Science projects, the authors present a **novel combination of Action Research, Citizen Science traditions and arts-based methods** that offer new strategies for scaling up, out and deep, thereby opening spaces for **epistemic diversity**. The youths’ roles, ranging from participating to partnering, provoke a re-thinking of the scaffolding needed to provide for epistemic partner growth and care.

The third article, titled “Shared life, solidarity action, inter-knowledge research: A narrative of three processes in Mexico that question what is and is not Participatory Action Research”, written by María Eugenia Sánchez, **raises questions about Participatory Action Research (PAR)**. The author analyses in first-person, three processes in which she was involved. These included daily interaction over 16 years in a Nahuatl indigenous community; knowledge construction with a young migrant moving from a rural community in Puebla to New York; and the author’s connection and reflection on the Zapatista movement 30 years after the uprising. In her writing, she foregrounds the importance of disrupting traditional (political or academic) narratives, knowing by transforming reality, and upholding dignified presents without ceasing to struggle.

“University-city learning for sustainable and inclusive urban futures: Two community-based action research experiences in Europe”, written by Beñat Flores-Puga, John Andersen, Aitor Zuberogoitia, Martin Severin Frandsen and Kristian Nagel Delica, is the fourth article of this special issue. The authors posit **community-based action research pedagogies as a way of extending the reach and scope of action research**. By comparing two community-based action research initiatives developed at Roskilde University (Denmark) and Mondragon University (Spain), the authors show how community-based action research principles are translated into practice through problem and challenge-based project work, design thinking and shared civic infrastructures. While their analysis reveals tensions around time frames, participation, power, and institutional constraints, the authors find that when supported by long-term partnerships and co-governance, such pedagogies can reposition universities as civic partners in urban transformation.

The fifth article, “Care as collective work: Transforming public response to family caregiving through action research” by Maddalena Gambirasio, Giuseppe Scaratti, and

Giosuè Ruggeri, focuses on **democratizing knowledge production, bridging experiential and institutional expertise, and constructing collaborative governance to generate change within local welfare systems**. The authors examine how public institutions, supported by university researchers playing a role as facilitators, can develop innovative responses to family caregivers' needs through Participatory Action Research. The experience led to the creation of a Caregiver Lab, which is more than a network connecting caregivers and the diverse organisations involved in their support; it is a reflective governance device and co-design arena. Through iterative cycles of listening, dialogue, and collective inquiry, the Lab enabled shared meaning-making, institutional learning, and the co-construction of concrete actions. The study highlights how collaborative infrastructures can address care-related complexity and strengthen democratic participation in welfare systems.

In writing this introduction, we take the opportunity to reflect, from our respective positionalities, upon some of the wider issues that the peer-reviewed articles in this special issue speak to. We were both born and raised in, what is nowadays commonly referred to as, the Global South, a category which is helpful to bring forth certain issues, but that actually involves countries with very different cultures and realities. One of us (Malida) is from Mauritius. The other one of us (Patricia) is from Mexico.

Malida: As a Mauritian, born and raised on an island with a history of colonisation (by the Dutch, French and then the British) before its independence in 1968, there are topics related to political economy, globalisation, democracy, territorial development, and justice-related issues that naturally call my attention. Having spent most of the last seventeen years in the Global North, I have also become acutely conscious of the dominant knowledge system pervading universities both in the Global North and Global South. During my time working at a Canadian university, situated on the unceded territory of First Nations people, I started exploring Indigenous, decolonial, and postcolonial studies to better understand issues coming to the surface through my teaching and research. This raised critical awareness of the epistemic foundations of my Eurocentric higher education. Today, when I think about democracy, socio-economic or territorial development, I am, for example, mindful of intersectionality and epistemic justice (Mooken, 2024). I was never *taught* action research at universities. This is probably not surprising for many action researchers, especially for those of us with a management and economics disciplinary background. I learnt action research by doing it, grounded in what I was living in my projects and my reading of key publications. It has been a fulfilling and yet challenging journey in academia, leading me to care deeply about enhancing action research education and training.

Patricia: When I first came to live in the Basque Country (a region in the Northern part of Spain) in the late 1990s, I noticed that events happening in the rest of the world rarely showed up in small-talk. As an International Relations graduate, it made me wonder why, growing up in Mexico City, my experience had been different. Surely it had to do with the fact that after independence from Spain, when it was not the British, it was the French, and when it was not them, it was the United States trying to get a hold of our country. We must have developed hypervigilance, like people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Maybe it also had to do with having lived in a country ruled by a single party for 71 years, which developed a tight grip on the mass media and perhaps made developments in faraway Asia easily available for our distraction. It might have also been our geography: the Atlantic to one side, the Pacific to the other, the longest of borders with the so-called first world, combined with our deep indigenous roots and heritage plus immigration flows from Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Or maybe not, and it was simply a developing country condition, because in those days we were still more vulnerable to “external shocks” than developed countries. So, my journey has been from the outside to the inside. It took me time to understand that reality is also shaped and can be changed by micro changes. Through action research, I have been training my nearsight. And that is why it is not surprising that one of my main interests as an action researcher is to explore third-person action research, and how the local and the global negotiate their boundaries and shape each other (Canto-Farachala, 2020).

The following discussion interweaves our reflections drawing on the contributions of the papers, presented in this special issue. We end each thematic reflections with questions that serve two purposes. Firstly, to relate to contributions made by the papers in this special issue, and secondly for readers to reflect upon their own action research work.

The Zapatista movement and globalisation

The uprising by the Zapatista movement happened the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered into force. The Mexican government had purported NAFTA as a symbol of Mexico’s consolidation as a trustworthy economy. The country had been showcased by the international financial institutions as an example of successful economic reform, following the economic liberalisation recipes known as the Washington Consensus. The Zapatista movement unveiled the tremendous social inequalities that persisted in the country despite the story of success being told. Framed as a broader fight against neoliberalism and globalisation, the Zapatista movement came to be known as the first revolution of the 21st century (Carrigan, 1995). A year later, a massive short-term capital outflow followed a devaluation of the Mexican peso. Contagion to other developing countries happened at a speed that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier, facilitated by a combination of technology and financial liberalisation. The Mexican peso crisis came to be known as the first financial crisis of the 21st century (Camdessus, 1995).

We refer to both episodes (the Zapatista movement, with its demand for participatory democracy and as a symbol of resistance to the neoliberal agenda, and to the contagion effects of the Mexican peso crisis, as an early warning of the downside of globalisation) because during the first quarter of the 21st century, we have experienced continued crises that have also quickly spread. A financial meltdown in 2008 and the policies adopted to address it led to the Great Recession, resulting in widespread economic hardship and exposing deep vulnerabilities in the global economy. A pandemic in 2020 laid bare widening inequality within and among countries. Moreover, so-called positive economic shocks, like a sudden global appetite for avocados, severely damaged the environment, water supplies, and communities in producing territories, like Michoacán, Mexico. Or the complex societal and environmental shifts linked to the rapid and unregulated evolution of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), rooted primarily in economic and technology-driven rationales. Though we are seeing the unfolding of comprehensive regulatory frameworks such as the EU AI act and those of China, Singapore and South Korea, there continues to be a lack of accountability amidst evidence that large corporations deploying AI technologies are putting immense stress on natural and human resources, especially in Africa, Asia and South America. The vast water consumption of data

centres impacts local communities in which they are based and where potable water may be in short supply (United Nations, 2024). There are reports of increasing energy demands for data centers and exploitative working conditions of data workers (Du & Okolo, 2025; Hao & Hernández, 2022). In parallel, the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation through social media has polarised societies, weakened public trust in democratic institutions, and fuelled political extremism. Overall, we live in an era characterised by “the stagnation of global democratisation and dehumanisation” (Larrea, 2022, p.201).

This brings us to reflect on: How are we, as action researchers, connecting our work to important social and political movements, if at all?

Epistemic delinking and freedom

“Who, when, why and where is knowledge generated?” This simple and yet fundamental question by Walter Mignolo (2009, p.160) probes us to go beyond the ‘what’ of knowledge – the ‘known’ – and to direct our attention to the ‘knower’ as well. The knower is inherently implicated in the known, and knowledge is always situated (Haraway, 1988). In action research, this is typically addressed from three main angles:

- Recognising that knowers are not only academic researchers and experts but also people who participate and collaborate in generating knowledge, such as practitioners, community members, and policymakers.
- Using active voice and pronouns, such as I and we, and giving space to the voices that speak and shape the knowledge discussed, so that they are not concealed or erased in the writing of the narrative and analysis.
- Being explicit about the positionalities of the authors and researchers.

However, how are we engaging with what Mignolo refers to as: the engagement in epistemic disobedience and de-linking from the Euro-North American centric ideas of modernity and promises of economic stability, growth or prosperity, as characterised by the likes of the Washington Consensus? Delinking refers to a decolonial epistemic shift towards a pluriversality of knowledge systems, and understanding of philosophies, politics, economies, and ethics (Mignolo, 2007). It means breaking the hegemony of knowledge by “changing the terms and not just the content of conversation” (ibid. p.459). This delinking is observed in social movements like the Zapatista from their philosophical to political and economic revolution. Are we critically aware of such epistemic shifts and how are we acting on this in action research projects and publications?

Action research in higher education

In our experience, action research pedagogies, methodologies, and strategies are not widely taught, nor understood in conventional social science faculties/departments and universities more broadly. There are often pressures to conform to hegemonic disciplinary practices

(Ahmed, Kaur, Mookan & Sekhon, 2023) and as Bradbury (2010), suggests, “it [action research] is tolerated more or less depending on the context” (p.95). Still, if we are to enhance the reach and potential of action research, then action research courses and training for students and early career researchers are crucial.

Can PhD programs in action research be housed in universities? This is a question that Morten Levin (2003) asked more than two decades ago. Given the serious bureaucratic and political challenges of creating an action research PhD program in universities, which Levin regarded as knowledge conservationists, he suggested “creating a program in action research . . . without formally negotiating it as a program in AR” (ibid., p.222). To this, he added, that “it would help that the academic institution that potentially would host such a program were to maintain a de facto non-conventional epistemological position”. Regarding the curriculum and teaching process of such programs, one of the challenges identified was enabling students to engage in concrete social change.

A possibility is for university research departments and institutes to recruit predoctoral students to join research teams engaged in action research projects with local stakeholders. By participating in action research projects and learning to conceptualise from practice, these students are exposed, early on, to a methodological approach that they would rarely find in a traditional doctoral course. An example of this approach can be found in the Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, based in the Basque Country (Spain). When a few years ago Orkestra hired a group of predoctoral researchers to join the research institute, they were all asked to participate in an ad hoc two-year training on action research, while joining different research teams working with local stakeholders. When the training was over, the predoctoral researchers systematised their collective experience in a framework for successfully training predoctoral researchers as young facilitative actors of territorial development (Eguia, Begiristain, Gaztañaga, Icaran-Diaz de Corcuera, Izulain, and Sánchez-Cambria, 2025) and exercised their freedom to decide what methodological approach they wanted to follow for their dissertation.

There are other pedagogical experiences in the field of territorial development that we take note of. For example, the Master’s degree in Territorial Development by the Rafaela Regional College of the National Technological University and the Institute for Technological and Social Research for Territorial Development (Praxis) in Rafaela, Argentina, which has action research as a core feature of the pedagogical approach. Training in the program relates to building capacity for change and territorial development, and the change processes are created both for the benefit of individuals and the wider community. This is achieved through a strong connection between research and training, individual and collective capacities, and the university and society (Costamagna, 2020). Another example is that of an elective course offered in the Master’s programs “Knowledge Development and Innovation” and “Industrial Economy and Technology Management” at the School of Business and Law at the University of Agder in Norway (Karlsen, 2020, 2024). Through a dialogical process, moving between abstract and concrete discussions, students and teachers address territorial development through co-generation with regional actors, and reflection on the process. This allows them to “situate themselves within their need to transform into territorial actors” (Karlsen 2020, p.140). Such approaches involve engaging and organising activities with regional/territorial actors in ways that require resources other than books and articles, taking teaching and learning beyond the confines of the classroom.

Echoing Karlsen (2020), how can we develop more of such pedagogical approaches, amplifying action research and in so doing opening the ivory towers to different knowledge systems?

Transcending single cases and systemic change

A pending task for action researchers was noted by Davydd Greenwood back in 2002 as that of further exploring the circumstances under which action research can have broader effects on larger macro-structural problems. Greenwood highlighted Björn Gustavsen's program on working life in Scandinavia and Paulo Freire's term as state minister of education in Brazil as rare attempts for action research to move beyond localized challenges. In terms of scale, action research can be linked to spaces in which people come together to discuss and decide action for the future, so large participative processes can elevate and proliferate small group transformation processes already in place (Bradbury, 2023). Gaining scale is also being explored through the use of technology in participatory processes, amidst ethical challenges related to research control of personal data and disclosure (Canto-Farachala et al. 2023).

Furthermore, Danny Burns (2007, 2014) proposes integrating systems thinking with participatory action research in order to develop emergent and adaptive learning architectures. These architectures enable the participation of multiple actors engaged in parallel and interconnected processes of inquiry. The reach of action research may be enhanced through attention to systemic inter-relationships within a particular field or domain (Burns, 2014). Through a systems perspective, action researchers develop a deeper understanding of the dynamic interactions operating within a system. From this viewpoint, initiated change in a specific process can trigger broader transformations across the wider system. Transformations may relate to the ways individuals and organisations think, behave, and act, both individually and collectively, across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Such transformations may occur incrementally and over extended periods, or may manifest in discontinuous forms. Systemic change can thus be understood as emergent, and is reflected in transformations that are not solely numerical or geographical.

To what extent are we, as action researchers, adopting a systems perspective in our processes and involved in connecting inquiry processes to address the complex global challenges we are facing?

In conclusion

In our call for this special issue, we invited contributions addressing topics such as scaling transformative work; connecting and communicating with collaborators; innovative thinking and practice in organisations such as think tanks, research centres, universities, and NGOs; and epistemic disobedience and delinking. We aimed to learn from each other (researchers, practitioners and activists, ...) and build on what unites us.

In a way, for us, this special issue stands as a celebration of the reach of action research in addressing important issues in different environments. Each of the projects discussed in the papers demonstrates considerable work involved in developing action research processes and in sharing core learnings from those. We hope that our readers find inspiration for their own work, in these contributions.

In their paper, Frimann, Rohwedder, Rohwedder, & Le Fevre (2026) propose an innovative methodological approach, Composite Narrative Cases, to scale out beyond single case studies “while preserving [the] participatory, practice-based essence” and enhancing the communicability and ethical dissemination of action research projects. The paper by Hagen and Kitterød (2026) brings us to reflect on the (epistemic) agency of young people as multiple, complex beings. The authors remind us of the demands of epistemic justice in action research projects – to look deeper, going beyond inclusion and participation, to ensure that knowledge co-generated with marginalised groups is considered seriously and put to good use by decision-makers. One of the insights in the paper by Sánchez (2026) is around the cognitive and emotional challenges that she experienced in PAR processes, and the awareness of the tensions between academic institutions, organisations, and communities, in terms of the logics and temporalities. She raises thought-provoking questions on PAR, inviting us to reflect on our work. What is Participatory Action Research and how can it become an “Art of Dignity Construction Under the Harshes Conditions”? Flores-Puga, Andersen, Zuberogoitia, Frandsen, & Delica (2026) present community-based action research pedagogies as a way of extending the reach and scope of action research in their paper. Their cases posit “the city as a classroom and local actors as partners in enquiry”, thereby showing how community-based action research can transform higher education. The paper by Gambirasio, Scaratti, and Ruggeri (2026) shows the scope of participatory action research in bringing systemic change, rooted in participation, social justice, and epistemic fairness. Systemic change often requires strong facilitation amongst groups, structured around cycles of reflection, dialogue, and action. This is highlighted in the Caregiver Bergamo – Beside Those Who Care project, in which facilitation, and the roles and responsibilities, were shared by different actors.

To round up the special issue, and to learn more about the 2024 IJAR Symposium in Montreal, we invite you to read “Connect. Act. Decenter”, an interview with Isabel Heck.

We are grateful to everyone who made this publication possible. The authors, who trusted us with their manuscripts; the peer reviewers, who kindly provided constructive comments to the authors; and the editor-in-chief of IJAR, who supported us along the way. We think that this process was a learning experience for all of us and in the spirit of pushing boundaries to enhance the reach and scope of action research, we hope that such dialogue will continue.

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