

## “Connect. Act. Decenter”. An interview with Isabel Heck on the 2024 IJAR Symposium

by Patricia Canto-Farachala and Malida Mooken

### **Patricia and Malida:**

Could you tell us a bit about your trajectory in action research? How did you become an action researcher?

### **Isabel:**

My path into action research began at the limits of my PhD in anthropology. While my doctoral work focused on social change through civil society organisations, it was conducted with limited involvement in processes of change. This shifted when I took up a postdoctoral fellowship in a research centre on social inequalities located not in a university, but within a public social and health service organisation. There, I worked with a grassroots organisation in the largest social housing complex in Québec, where I both supported the systematisation of their practice and became actively involved in their work.

It was really through taking on a community-based researcher position at the non-profit organisation *Parole d'ExcluEs* in 2013 that my practice and identity as an action researcher fully developed. I was embedded in a community organisation inspired by Brazilian movements that invited residents of low-income neighbourhoods to become protagonists of change in transforming their communities. My role was to carry out knowledge work in support of action: listening to and collectivising people's needs and aspirations; mobilising knowledge to co-design projects with residents and practitioners; systematising practice; and fostering collective reflexivity on our practices and actions.

Although we had strong links with academic researchers through the University Incubator of *Parole d'ExcluEs*, which I co-led for many years with Jean-Marc Fontan, we were not bound by academic rules or publication pressures. Our priority was to foster collective action with residents, and our research methods – and more broadly our knowledge work – were shaped by this orientation. We were thus simultaneously engaged in knowledge production and action on issues such as food access, housing, health services and inclusive urban planning.

After seven years, I moved into another hybrid role, this time in philanthropy, as Head of Knowledge and Learning for the Collective Impact Project in Montréal, where I am still working today. Alongside this, I remain engaged in various networks connected to action research, both in Québec and internationally. This is how I joined IJAR in early 2022, following an invitation from Miren Larrea.