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Introduction: Action Research, Policy and Politics

Special Issue of the International Journal of Action Research

Julia Wittmayer, Koen Bartels and Miren Larrea (guest editors)

The current COVID-19 pandemic is putting public trust in representative democratic institutions to the test: arguably in an unprecedented manner. However, it only is the tip of the iceberg. The Paris Agreement in 2015 signalled nation states' commitment to putting global warming to a halt, but, five years later, there is widespread disappointment and frustration with the absence of decisive and systematic action. With many national constitutions heralding equality between people of different sex, gender, age, colour and ethnicity, people consistently fail to see those rights translated into actual equal opportunities and treatment in society. The daily flood of news is supposed to enhance transparency and accountability but also fuels the post-truth bubbles of deeply divided political landscapes marred by conspiracy theories, anti-establishment sentiments and violent protests. Across the world, citizens are demanding urgent and transformative action to halt climate change, realise social justice and overturn entrenched powers in a range of novel, insurgent ways that challenge traditional political relationships, arenas and values. Political responses and institutional changes take shape through policy processes characterised by high levels of complexity, interdependence, and intransigence.

The underpinning rationale of this special issue is that the societal challenges we are facing require fundamental, long-term societal transformations that need to be co-produced by all relevant stakeholders. This includes the role and functioning of policy and politics, inviting us to imagine and enact new political-economic frameworks (Speth & Courrier, 2020). It also includes the role and functioning of science, inviting us to conceive and develop spaces to co-produce critical knowledge, transformative action and trustful relations (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). This special issue therefore addresses the need to connect across different fields to address societal problems, including climate change and social justice.

This editorial is not only an introduction to this special issue. The International Journal of Action Research (IJAR) aims for it to create a window of opportunity for researchers wanting to explore transformation at the interface of action research, policy and politics. By inviting us as guest editors, IJAR deliberately selected the fields of policy analysis, sustainability transition research and territorial development, because of ongoing efforts for cross-fertilisation at this interface. Hence, this editorial is also an invitation for action researchers in (and beyond) these fields to contribute to the ensuing conversation, about how to address multiple challenges emerging across fields committed to transformative change.

Action research as counter-hegemonic approach to policy and politics

The interface of action research, policy and politics is an important path to explore if we want to co-produce sustainability transitions. With its counter-hegemonic and increasingly trans-

formative agenda, action research can play a crucial role in navigating and changing the challenging dynamics of policy and politics. However, there are a wide range of different approaches and contingencies. Action research can, for example, be used to generate pressure for change on policy makers from outside the policy process, or to collaborate with policy makers and other stakeholders¹ in a critical-relational way.

In most action research processes, action researchers work with communities or social groups that are suffering from oppression, and have no voice in the political and policy decisions (Freire, 2000; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Hale, 2008), e.g., women in chronic homelessness (Vaccaro, 2020). The aim is to co-generate new knowledge and solutions with these communities or groups, that will later be presented to policy makers as recommendations (e.g., about how permanent housing for women should be developed) or shared with the different communities or groups involved to generate pressure on policy makers. This counter-hegemonic approach positions action researchers as outsiders to the policy process. It also positions policy makers at the receiving end of the process, being handed recommendations as a ‘finished’ product. In turn, the communities, social groups and wider stakeholders involved or affected are not included in policy processes, and hence not conceived as (legitimate) policy actors (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Consequently, action researchers seldom collaborate with policy actors, while action research on specific issues and the policy processes that address those same issues run parallel, reducing the potential impact of both policy and research.

This special issue explores another avenue; one where action researchers are inside the policy process, collaborating with policy actors in their endeavours to address societal challenges. Consequently, turning the communities and social groups, that action researchers co-generate knowledge and action with, into policy actors is more than a semantic twist: it raises fundamental questions about power and co-optation. How can action researchers play a transformative role as part of policy processes? How can they continue to play a critical, counter-hegemonic role, without becoming subdued to the status quo? How can they maintain meaningful and empowering relationships with all policy actors across their deep divides? The articles in this special issue address these questions, to kick-start a wider discussion among action researchers about the interface with politics and policy.

Action research meets policy and politics

We believe that the action research community stands to benefit from the ways in which the fields of policy analysis, sustainability transition research, and territorial development have been exploring the intricate ways in which policy and politics are implicated in societal issues. Despite their diverging backgrounds and trajectories, these fields are characterised by a shared interest in complex societal problems, the governance of systems designed to address these, and transformative change for the common good. Moreover, they have started to increasingly engage in action research over the past decade to address these issues (for overviews, see Karlsen & Larrea, 2014; Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

¹ From here on, we will use the term ‘policy makers’ to refer specifically to those in formal positions of power and ‘policy actors’ to include all those involved in and affected by policy processes.

Policy analysis is a well-established field, the origins of which are commonly traced back to the writings of Harold Lasswell (1951) about “the policy sciences of democracy” (14). Despite the problem-oriented, multidisciplinary and normative orientation that he advocated, the field became dominated by a rationalist-empiricist approach of conducting technical, value-free analysis to provide policy makers with objective knowledge for making authoritative decisions (DeLeon, 2006). The field has long moved on to study the processes, institutions and powers through which policies are made, but the mainstream still operates within a rationalist-empiricist framework. An alternative, and in itself well-established, stream is formed by a range of critical and interpretivist approaches driven by normative ideals of democracy, emancipation, and social justice (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Fischer et al., 2015). Critically investigating the socio-political implications of hegemonic epistemological beliefs, these approaches interpret the argumentative processes through which policies are enacted, negotiated and contested. A key insight is that policy processes involve a multiplicity of meanings, values, knowledge, discourses, emotions, practices and power relationships that not only render them complex, but proliferate the differences, conflicts and inequalities that make a sustainable and just world an exceedingly elusive ideal. It is within this stream of policy analysis that action research has been steadily gaining ground as a favoured way of collaborating with stakeholders in “exploring preference differences, agreeing on problem definitions, and jointly designing solutions ... [that are] problem-driven and aimed at enhancing reflexivity, reshaping relations, and increasing evolutionary learning” (Li & Wagenaar 2019, 581).

Sustainability transition research is a relatively young, emerging interdisciplinary field of research, interested in questions of sustainability and (processes of) structural societal change (Grin et al. 2011). Initially, the focus was on describing, explaining, or interpreting fundamental changes in socio-technical system, such as energy, water or transportation, often driven by technological innovations. An often-heard criticism in the 2000 s was that much research neglected issues of power and politics. By now, a growing group of scholars focuses specifically on those questions, as well as on social innovation as drivers for change (Haxeltine et al. 2018). They have contributed to the emergence of a socio-institutional approach in the field (Loorbach et al. 2017). While a broader group shares the ambition for increased research impact², there is but a small group of sustainability transition researchers using action-oriented research approaches. A recent review of the methodological and philosophical underpinnings of sustainability transition research showed that transdisciplinary, knowledge co-production, or action research approaches are still operating at the margins of the field (Zolfagharian et al. 2019). Within the group of scholars engaging in such approaches, we find a broad array of orientations, including relational, pragmatic, reformist or emancipatory.

Territorial development literature in Europe takes local and regional economic development as its backbone. At the local level, industrial districts have been defined as a complex and intractable network of external economies and diseconomies, of connections in costs and historical and cultural factors, of inter-firm relations and inter-personal ones (Marshall, 1890). Territory from this perspective is an economic resource that connects technology with culture, and firms with their environment, translating competition into cooperation and societal mo-

2 Testimony are the titles of the annual conferences organized by the Sustainability Transitions Research Network. For example IST 2016: Exploring Transition Research as Transformative Science; IST 2017: Taking the lead in real world transitions; or the upcoming IST 2021: Mainstreaming sustainability transitions: From research towards impact.

bilisation (Becattini, 1979). At regional level, literature has focused on the concept of regional innovation systems (Asheim, 2001; Isaksen, Martin and Tripple, 2018). Its overall premise is that knowledge helps innovation, innovation brings competitiveness, and competitiveness is the source of wellbeing. During recent years, the focus is on Regional Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3) (Foray, 2016), which conceptually integrate regional and local levels (Barca, 2009). In this context, grand societal challenges, and especially the climate crisis, have challenged the field. On the one hand, the traditional connections between innovation, competitiveness and wellbeing have been questioned. Innovation is no longer considered a purely technical issue; it has deep political consequences (Tödtling and Trippl, 2018), and competitiveness needs to respond to sustainability (Gianelle et al., 2016). On the other hand, the field is challenged to understand territory as a multi-scalar phenomenon, where policy cannot solve problems exclusively on one scale or another, and multiple levels of government need to collaborate in policy making. Action research has been proposed and practiced as a methodology in regional development (Levin, 2007; Pålshaugen, 2013) and some of its proponents have gathered around the label of *action research for territorial development* to address both the political dimension and multiscalearity (Karlsen and Larrea, 2014; Arrona, Karlsen and Larrea, 2020). These contributions have been considered as part of the regional innovation policy field by some of its leading authors (Isaksen, Martin, and Trippl, 2018), however, action research remains a marginal approach in terms of the number of researchers that practice it.

Insights at the interface of action research, policy and politics

When comparing the developments of these three fields, one thing that stands out is that action research is taken up in their peripheries, to offer a transformative alternative to mainstream empiricist approaches. Similar to the wider action research community (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), action researchers in policy analysis, sustainability transition research and territorial development want to live up to their fields' latent normative ambitions for making a difference in the pursuit of a democratic, just and sustainable world. Action research offers them a rich methodological repertoire for addressing societal problems, both in terms of the complexity of issues as the multitude of stakeholders and governance systems involved. Since we cannot possibly do justice to the advances and variety of approaches in these three fields, we highlight three key insights about the interface of action research, policy and politics that emerged from recent efforts to bridge them with each other and the wider action research community.

First, action research can facilitate collaborative reflection, learning and change around policy issues characterised by uncertainty, complexity, conflict and interdependence (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2014; Larrea & Arrona, 2019; Li & Wagenaar 2019). It offers researchers a range of methods and principles that go beyond just pointing out to policy actors that they need to recognise the multiplicity of perspectives, expertise, experiences, emotions and values that each bring to the issue. Rather, action research enables policy actors to recognise multiplicity as part of a joint process of learning how to collaborate in more holistic, inclusive and effective ways (Foster et al., 2019). Drawing on deliberative approaches to policy making that move beyond conventional models, action researchers can create “interpretive settings to

contribute to sense-making among policy actors that previously don't share meaning and have shared vocabularies" (Arrona, 2020, 190). While power remains an integral feature of these processes, engaging with politics and policy does not necessarily take the form of counter-hegemonic struggle. It can bring all those affected, including marginalised groups and those in positions of power, together to build robust relationships and generate mutually beneficial change.

Second, doing action research in political and policy settings means engaging in critical-relational dynamics (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). The aim is to challenge and transform hegemonic interpretations of policy, unequal power relations, and unsustainable political-economic systems, which is an emergent, interactive process of joint sense making and relationship building. Being both critical and relational is obviously challenging to do: how can we be transformative and pragmatic at the same time when negotiating the scope of change and the nature of our relationships with policy actors? Drawing on shared foundations in classical pragmatism and General Systems Theory (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Bartels et al., 2020), the answer is that critical awareness and strengthening of mutual interdependencies go hand in hand with abilities to holistically expand and integrate different forms of knowledge and capacities to confront problems. A concrete example is that policy actors are more open to be challenged by action researchers if they have developed mutual trust and understanding. Likewise, they are better able to change existing policies and systems when they come to appreciate how their relational dynamics have produced the current, undesirable situation. And think of how co-productive processes of critically inquiring into existing policy problems and imagining alternative futures can reveal what kinds of relationships are needed to enable sustainable development (for further details on these examples, see Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

Third, policy actors and action researchers co-generate what is simultaneously both policy and research (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; Karlsen and Larrea, 2014). In other words, policy actors are stakeholder participants in the research process, and action researchers are stakeholder participants in the policy process (Larrea, 2019). As we have already discussed, action researchers are thus not outside the policy process, but inside, collaborating with policy actors to address societal challenges. This mutual engagement is underexplored in the action research literature.

Building on these three key insights, this special issue is an exploration of how policy actors as stakeholder participants in action research, and action researchers as stakeholder participants in policy processes, can fruitfully engage in critical-relational dynamics aimed at collaborative reflection, learning and transformative change.

Aim of this special issue

This special issue aims to further explore the interface of action research, policy and politics. The contributions from across policy analysis, transition research, and territorial development include creative, non-traditional formats, and are all aimed at increasing our understanding of the coproduction of sustainability transformations through action research. The special issue is not only a collection of articles. In the run up to its publication, a broader group of participants,

including the contributors and the editorial team, came together to examine and exchange the manifestations and processes through which policy and politics manifest in their action research. Based on two dialogue sessions in June and September 2020, five main questions and working propositions emerged. During the IJAR Symposium 2020 on the 1st and 2nd of October 2020, the group deliberated with the symposium participants on each of these questions and related working propositions, to develop strategies on how action researchers could address these (see table 1). We discuss these questions and working propositions below, and explain how the five articles in the special issue address and illuminate them.

Table 1. Overview of questions and answers IJAR symposium

Question	Answer
<i>Who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change?</i>	Reflect on who is seen to be legitimate and by whom. Adopt and develop methods that give legitimacy to those who need power to change policy processes and discourse. These methods need to reflect their everyday experiences and practices and relate to elements of hegemonic discourse.
<i>How can action researchers collaborate with and challenge those in positions of power?</i>	There is a risk of futility/sterility in action research. What makes a fertile space within power dynamics? Listening to ourselves as we listen to others. Use of tools for working with polarity of perspectives (e.g. Fishbowl, theatre)
<i>How can action researchers support learning and reflexivity about societal challenges?</i>	Moving beyond transferability to connecting AR practices, by applying visuals and other artefacts that people can identify with (through emotions, identification and connectivity) in complex situations.
<i>How to address power differentials in working with disempowered groups?</i>	Methodological flexibility: Less scientific rigour, but supportive of relationship building. Continuous reflexivity on layers of powerlessness to address power differentials within and between groups. Building a sustainable movement around the marginalised groups. Skipping between conflict and cooperation with those in power – whether policy or politician.
<i>How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?</i>	Unpacking legitimacy in terms of levels (from the personal to the organizational and democratic) and then looking at it in terms of conflict, power, time and cultural specificities.

1. Who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change?

Action research is part of the endeavour of researchers to face and address grand societal challenges. In their article, Simon De Muynck and Dominique Nalpas share their experience in two projects, PHOSPHORE and BRUSSEAU, addressing the transformation of socio-technical systems of biowaste and water management in Brussels. Both projects used co-creation as a methodological framework, and participants were considered as co-researchers throughout the process. In sharing these cases, De Muynck and Nalpas guide us through very rich and nuanced accounts, where technical and expert knowledge on the one hand, and experiential knowledge by participants on the other, entangle in mutually transforming ways. Through questioning the legitimacy of technical knowledge, the political dimension is brought to the surface. The article thus demonstrates how co-creation enables tensions and politics to emerge.

During the IJAR symposium 2020, reflections on this article inspired relevant questions regarding the integration of action research in political and policy arenas. One of these questions referred to who is considered to have power and legitimacy to influence policy change. One answer that was explored is that anyone who is part of the complex system has legitimacy to influence policy, but that not everyone has the power to do so. The challenge is thus to co-create political empowerment of policy actors in complex systems, which requires institutional arrangements that can generate real, democratic, and agonistic co-creation. The participants argued that action researchers need to use methods that give legitimacy to those who need power to change policy processes, and challenge the dominating and silencing influence of hegemonic discourse. These methods need to reflect their everyday experiences and practices and relate to elements of hegemonic discourse.

In their discussion of the ‘political’, ‘politic’ and ‘policies’, De Muynck and Nalpas open a debate about the legitimacy to influence development projects. They discuss the roles of citizen knowledge and expert knowledge, and their connections to power and transformation. In this context, they provide examples of how Participatory Action Research (PAR) confronts post-political answers from governance institutions. By doing this, participants open a black box that often remains closed, and make the political and its related power relationships visible, to bring decisions previously made by ‘shadow actors’ to the co-generative arena. The ensuing re-balancing of power creates new and ambitious forms of collaboration, required by tomorrow’s social-ecological systems. De Muynck and Nalpas argue that PAR can thus fulfil an important role, by helping the political to surface in the search for a new political ecology, and call upon action researchers to take up this role.

2. How can action researchers collaborate with and challenge those in positions of power?

Collaboration with stakeholders is the hallmark of action research, and one of its gratifying features. However, it is also incredibly challenging to do, especially when collaborating with policy actors in positions of power, who we also seek to challenge. What do we do when a conflict or tension in our relationship (either explicit or tacit) emerges? As Miren Larrea, Xabier Barandiaran, and Hilary Bradbury put it, “we do not have much shared fluency about

the importance of, much less the ingredients for and practice with, creating high-quality ... relational spaces, i.e., those in which telling the truth elevates the capacity for positive outcomes” (pp. 55). Drilling down into the nitty-gritty of these critical-relational dynamics, they reflect on how they handled a challenging episode in the relationship of Larrea and Barandiaran, in the context of their ongoing collaboration on a territorial development policy in the Basque Country, Spain.

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants engaged in a dialogue on the central yet often unrecognised role of power and emotions in policy and politics. They reflected that there is a risk of futility or sterility in our work when we develop it exclusively in the realm of reason, without any connection to our emotions. But if we are to recognise and deal with emotions, including anger, fear, compassion and love, how can we create a fruitful space within power dynamics? Suggestions were made, based on the participants’ experiences, for how to create safe spaces for experimenting with emotions and power. These ranged from listening to ourselves as we listen to others, to using tools for working with a polarity of perspectives (e.g., Fishbowl, theatre).

The approach that Larrea, Barandiaran, and Bradbury develop is ‘reflexive co-agency’: “a relationship in which self-expression of participants can be seen as reciprocally shaping one another and, simultaneously, shaping and potentially transforming political structures” (pp. 44). Drawing on Action Research for Transformations, reflexive co-agency is cultivated by creating a relational space in which participants recognise the debilitating emotional effects of coercive power, engage in self- and mutual inquiry to compare diverging interpretations of situations, and seek mutuality through other-regarding emotions (i.e., mutual regard, intimacy, commitment, love). Larrea and Barandiaran share a unique, intimate account of their unfolding relationship as Bradbury facilitated them, through a combination of joint online meetings and individual reflective writing, in clarifying the departure point, gaining awareness of individual positions, and constructing mutuality. The six stages of this process serve as valuable guidance for action researchers and policy actors seeking to transform their relationships in other ‘micro-environments’; the ability to fruitfully do so is an important outstanding challenge.

3. How can action researchers support learning and reflexivity about societal challenges?

Action research can make a tremendous difference to the people involved, helping to address the issues they face. But, more often than not, its ability to transform wider systems is limited. So how can action research support learning and reflexivity that extends beyond the ‘here and now’? Martien Kuitenbrouwer experienced this challenge first-hand, when several local policy practitioners with whom she had previously organised ‘reconstruction clinics’ asked for more help. While they had gained new insight into how their relational dynamics had given shape to the conflict they had been embroiled in, they still felt ‘stuck’ in their collaborative networks: moving in circles, having the same conversations over and over again, without resolving the underlying problem. The question Kuitenbrouwer asks, therefore, is how, in such complex and tense situations, action research can enable ‘breakthroughs’ which are both transferable and workable to other policy actors (managers, politicians, practitioners from other organisations) and contexts (future situations in the network, similar problems the policy

practitioners are facing elsewhere, similar problems experienced by other policy actors in very different settings).

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants had a conversation about how to make learning transferable and transformative. The key insight that emerged was that we need to co-create visual, creative and engaging artefacts that enable others to ‘re-live’ what has been experienced and learned. The visual artefacts need to be crafted in such a way that a range of policy actors in complex situations can identify with them, through their emotions, a sense of recognition and identification, and a feeling of connection. This can be challenging to achieve. How, for instance, can the director of a municipal service get a genuine experiential grasp of what it means for an adolescent to be vulnerable? Action researchers need to be sensitive to inequalities and differences in power and expertise, while co-producing visual artefacts and facilitating transferable and transformative learning.

In her article, Kuitenbrouwer shares her experiences with conducting facilitative action research with three policy networks that got stuck in their efforts to address complex care and safety problems in the Netherlands. Inspired by systems thinking, she co-produced ‘causal loop diagrams’ by visualising their patterns of interaction, naming these patterns, and sharing them within and across the three case contexts. This enabled the policy practitioners involved to see how they interactively produced the unintended consequences they were stuck in and, rather than responding to the problems defensively out of blame avoidance, feel a sense of collective ownership and empowerment for addressing them. Moreover, the transferable nature of the visuals helped the policy practitioners to achieve a more transformative impact in three ways. First, it shifted the focus of their conversations, from the immediate problems at hand, to how they could break through these patterns of interaction. Second, it enabled them to have conversations on a more abstract level with their managers about the kind of support and changes they needed. Finally, it institutionalised joint reflection and learning as part of their collaborative networks. How to continue to sustain such commitment to and sharing of learning, as part of an ongoing transformative process, remains an open question.

4. How to address power differentials in working with disempowered groups?

Starting from the emancipatory agenda of PAR, an important question that remains is how to address power differentials when working with disempowered groups. In their contribution, György Málovics, Boglárka Méreiné Berki and Melinda Mihály analyse their long-term engagement with a Roma community in the Hungarian city of Szeged. One of the important results of their PAR process is the political empowerment of this group vis-à-vis the city council : the extent to which this result can be considered transformative, however, is critically discussed. The representation of the Roma community by certain members challenged but also reinforced existing power asymmetries. Therefore, the authors ask how to use action research for “deep-seated structural change, rather than superficial change that reinforces existing power imbalances” (pp. 83).

During the IJAR symposium 2020, a group of participants engaged in a dialogue on the underlying question on power differentials, and proposed several strategies to address these. A first recommendation was to approach the research with methodological flexibility, meaning investing in relationship and trust building, possibly at the expense of conventional notions of ‘scientific rigour’. Concretely, it could mean not recording conversations, but memorising and

write up field notes after the event: since otherwise conversations might not take place at all. This is especially important when working with disempowered groups, who often have manifold negative experiences with institutional actors, including researchers. Secondly, it was proposed to engage in a practice of continuous reflexivity, on the different layers of powerlessness to address power differentials within a disempowered group (homeless member of a Roma community vs. spokesperson of a Roma community), and between the researchers and a disempowered group. Thirdly, it was suggested to build a sustainable movement around the marginalised groups, to address the power differentials between a disempowered group and society at large while avoiding dependency on, for example, a single action researcher. Finally, working with marginalised groups involves skipping between conflict and co-operation with those in power. Questions to ponder on are: How to know what is right? Where does your loyalty lie? Where does power lie?

In their contribution, Málovics and colleagues address those questions and show the difficulty of using PAR for structural change. They show the practical and moral intricacies of engaging in fields with extreme asymmetrical power relations: specifically the power differentials becoming evident in the struggle for desegregation within a minority such as a Roma community in a Hungarian city. Empowering certain actors within a group, who then ‘represent’ the group vis-à-vis city administration, may in the end not ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. Since desegregation policies tend to promote a certain model of citizenship (white, middle class): only those willing to conform to such hegemonic ideas are welcomed, often including those official representatives. Others are “labelled deviants, or ‘non-deserving poor’, in a way that intensifies their marginalisation and disempowerment” (pp. 97). Further and more honest reflection is therefore needed on how action research can achieve transformation, when dealing with intractable oppressive structures tied with hegemonic framing of societal problems and extreme power inequalities.

5. How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?

The International Journal of Action Research aims, with this special issue, not only to be a space for reflection through academic articles, but also a discussion forum. In this issue, Rebecca Santos shares key insights inspired by her experiences with doing action research in the OECD.

The previous articles address local/regional action research processes developed in Brussels (Belgium), three region/cities in Netherlands, Szeged (Hungary) and Basque Country (Spain). This is representative of how action research usually develops, as its participatory dimension requires spaces of interaction that limit the scope of transformation. However, grand societal challenges, and clearly the ecological crisis, have a planetary dimension. Consequently, the action research community faces a challenge of scope to positively contribute to these challenges. The integration of action research in the working methodologies of multilateral organisations, such as the OECD, could be a first step to explore how by integrating projects in these different scales, the action research community can aspire to congruently address the local and global dimensions of grand societal challenges. By helping understand how action research operates in the OECD, Santos opens this path.

By sharing her experiences as “an action researcher in an advisor’s hat”, Santos connects with discussions held during the IJAR symposium about ‘How to embed action research processes and outcomes in policy systems?’. This discussion addressed the dilemma met by those action researchers that, aiming at transformation, deliberately position themselves outside the policy process. From that outsider position, they search for ways to embed action research in the ongoing policy processes. One of the issues that emerged as relevant in the discussion was the legitimacy of action researchers to transform policy. Participants unpacked legitimacy in terms of levels, and discussed personal legitimacy (researchers and policy actors are citizens and thus political actors); the legitimacy of organisations (the most cited were governments and universities) and democratic legitimacy (politicians have the legitimacy of having been democratically elected).

In her discussion paper, Santos invites the reader to reflect on three main lessons. First, to frame the value of action research with policy makers. Santos provides insight on the difficulties action researchers might face in multilateral organisations, because policy makers are rarely used to this type of methodology. Second, to diversify data and follow the story. Experiences with action research in the OECD help understand how a mixed method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data, can help to detect inconsistencies in policy narratives. Third, to prime practitioners to participate. Action researchers need to employ engaging methods to deal with trepidation, resistance, cynicism or plain inexperience from the side of policy actors. The future challenge for action researchers operating at the global level is to actively renegotiate relationships and expectations, in ways that empower policy actors to both understand and *feel* the value of action research.

In conclusion

In the introduction of this editorial, we explained that the main aim of the special issue is to advance understanding of how action researchers and policy actors can co-produce fundamental, long-term transformations of the societal challenges we are facing. We argued that action researchers could benefit from positioning themselves as part of policy processes, rather than outside and against them. This widens the array of transformation strategies that policy actors, including action researchers, can adopt to face grand societal challenges. Action researchers can use these strategies to act as insiders or outsiders to the policy process, and thus generate transformative tensions within it or from the outside. They may even engage in both positionalities in ways that reinforce each other. We also argued for reconceiving policy actors, to include not just who we conventionally think of as policy makers, but all relevant stakeholders. We encourage action researchers to embrace this variety in positionalities and roles, to learn more about the multiple potential connections between action research, policy and politics.

The papers in the issue open up what, for many action researchers, arguably is a black box of politics and policy, raising fundamental questions, mostly about how action researchers can transform policy processes from the inside, combining a counter-hegemonic role with fruitful relationships with various policy actors. This positionality as insiders to the policy process is one of the main contributions of this issue to the action research literature, where insider positions usually relate researchers to the ‘powerless’, and not the ‘powerful’ actors. The contributions to this special issue have done more than just offer a look into said black box.

Based on their fascinating insights around power, legitimacy, emotions, learning and systems change, we suggest replacing the image of a black box with the image of a prism that reflects the light that any particular action research approach shines on it, into a spectrum of issues that require ongoing reflexivity. We would like to conclude by highlighting the five spectra they identified for further inquiry across a variety of contexts:

1. How action researchers can help the political to surface in the search for a new political ecology;
2. How action researchers and policy actors can systematically transform their relationships across ‘micro-environments’;
3. How to continue to sustain commitment to and sharing of learning, as part of an ongoing transformative process;
4. What can be expected from action research seeking to achieve transformation while dealing with intractable oppressive structures tied with hegemonic framing of societal problems and extreme power inequalities;
5. How action researchers operating at the global level can actively re-negotiate relationships and expectations, in ways that empower policy actors to both understand and feel the value of action research.

Further investigation of these issues, as well as sharing of experiences with them, will strengthen our ability to navigate and transform the interface between action research, politics and policy. There could not be a more acute time for starting to do so.

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