Why Bother With Action Research:
Let's Ask Professor Susanne Elsen

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Abstract

The recent strong re-discovery of community-based action research – after three decades of marginalization – is on the one hand a result of the challenges of eco-social transformation, and on the other an indicator of the growing weight of civil society as a steering power in society (in this case in the scientific realm). It is obvious that eco-social transformation has to be based in processes of cooperative learning and participatory social change (Elsen, 2018, p. 50). With roots deep in the 20th century, high levels of visibility in the 1990s (Masters, 1995; Medina Garcia, 2022), and a decade of life in shadowland, Action Research (AR) has become "fashionable" again. As with many fashionable terms, it has many meanings, misinterpretations and applications for a variety of purposes. This contribution analyses Susanne Elsen's take on AR and her different roles therein, mainly based on a dialogue held with Susanne Elsen in October 2022. It focuses on participatory action research from a clear-cut ethical positioning: that is, research and action in active collaboration with a community, group, organization, looking for socio-economic and socio-ecological justice and in which community members hold key roles. In this short essay I want to reflect on why and how Susanne Elsen developed her career as an action researcher. I dwell on four questions: What is Action Research (AR)? Why should researchers conduct AR? How to become part of AR? And how has she taken on different roles in her AR? Section one addresses the first three questions, using my own work and that of my colleagues as a mirror. Section two gives us a taste of how she has engaged with AR in various roles. Section three reflects on the future of AR and how it could develop solid foundations.

1. Action Research:
What Is It, Why Conduct It, and How to Be Part of It?

Action Research is back in full force. Several factors have stirred this return—many of which can be traced back through history and others that are being reformulated in contemporary terms. These include the increasing alienation of people's rights in a growing number of areas in which the existential conditions of humans and other parts of nature are threatened; the dissatisfaction with political and economic leadership failing to address existential troubles; and a growing socio-political consciousness among citizenry, including the scientific community.

There are many explicit or implicit definitions of (participatory) Action Research[1]. Most useful definitions are "holistic", in the sense that they start from a particular issue that is addressed through research and action in its context, in its "wholeness" – and not its hol(e)(i)ness or isolation. The latter by-thought is not an intellectual flirtation but refers to two concerns in action research. AR should not be idealized or sanctified, nor should it fall in the hole of isolationist particuralism. AR should be holistic, inspired by the belief that the parts of something are interconnected and can be explained only by reference to the whole. The "whole" then is not abstract: It is revealed through real-life experience, observation, communication and analysis by all cooperating participants. The trigger of cooperation between different actors in AR is a combination of socio-political and socio-ecology urgency as well (scientific?) insight. For example, short food chain initiatives and the manner in which they can be integrated into alternative (local) food systems are a response to the urgency of food security but are also the outcome of teaming up between numerous local initiatives (Elsen, 2018, p. 4; Manganelli & Moulaert, 2019). But

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1   Masters (1995) makes a distinction between three types of AR: the scientific-technical view of problem solving; practical-deliberative action research; and critical-emancipatory action research. This chapter deals with type 3. See also: Bradbury (2010); Kirby et al. (2006).

experiences show that AR is hard work and requires "resetting" strategies and modes of communication recurrently.

The history of AR is rich and diverse. Many action researchers in different countries partnered with professional groups, citizens, activists, protest movements, local politicians and civil servants to address human urgencies in an informed way, at the crossroads of relevant knowledge and socio-politically pertinent action. Reduced visibility in certain periods or regions did not necessarily mean that AR became less practiced, but that researchers-activists often preferred to stay focused, targeting the human development objectives they had in mind and only seeking publicity when it could serve the cause.

The more mainstreamed term "Transdisciplinary Research" can be used as a synonym for AR, on the condition that it adopts a democratic practice of co-operation among partners, with an ethics of cooperation based on equity and a pluralist view of actorship.

The European Commission (EC) funded network on "Growing Inequality and Social Innovation: Alternative Knowledge and Practice in Overcoming Social Exclusion in Europe" (KATARSIS) gave great attention to transdisciplinarity and its methodology. A KATARSIS report by members of the transdisciplinary Social Innovation Action Research (SIAR) network specifies the need for transdisciplinary research:

> Transdisciplinary research, therefore, complements applied research in fields characterised by complexity and uncertainty. As Pohl and Hirsch Hadorn (2007) write: "There is a need for transdisciplinary research when knowledge about a socially relevant problem field is uncertain, when the concrete nature of problems is disrupted, and when there is a great deal at stake for those concerned by problems and involved in dealing with them", such as poverty, health, migration, cultural transformation, climate change, bio engineering of new crops, etc. (Moulaert et al., 2011, p. 3)

Transdisciplinarity links theory and practice – scientists and practitioners (a misleading distinction given the hybridity of knowledge and practice) – in various ways in order to help solve existing problems of social exclusion and address challenges for inclusion. This requires willingness to experiment with new forms of thought and action – socially creative strategies – because problems usually get pigeonholed according to responsibilities, competences and disciplines, which often leads to partial and socially ineffective solutions. Participants in transdisciplinary dialogues are eager to discover new interconnections between allegedly different dimensions of social exclusion and inclusion. Through the collective cogitation of people with diverse experience and different expertise, it becomes possible to enhance, support and facilitate certain processes and strategies identified as desirable (Novy & Bernstein, 2009; García Cabeza et al., 2009; MacCallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010).

In its more-than-two-decade-long practice, the SIAR network moved away from an interdisciplinary focus (synergizing fields of scientific competence) to an interactive focus (with a truly transdisciplinary approach). In doing so, it stressed equity in cooperation among partners and gave a priori equal importance to knowledge and skill fields of participants (synergizing socioecology across actors) (Moulaert & Mehmood, 2020).

The trigger for the SIAR trajectory was the EC's programme to address poverty (Poverty III) that started in the late 1980s and focused on "Local Development to Combat Poverty". In this first project in the SIAR trajectory, we practiced AR as participatory observation in neighbourhoods and localities, developing strategies to surpass the consequences of industrial restructuring through shared analysis and collective strategy definition – with the important role of the Integrated Area Development (IAD)[2]. It was considered a

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2   Model whose interpretation led to the definition of social innovation in local development (see Moulaert, 2000).

collaborative, multi-disciplinary AR involving scientists, activists, community workers, policy makers, etc. In the second project (URSPIC) we moved to interdisciplinarity – integrating contributions from different disciplines into a shared analytical framework – and then moved gradually on towards transdisciplinarity and AR.

As we became Action Researchers properly speaking, the role of theory and theory building grew in importance and led to the co-production of a meta-theory: a grand narrative of how local actors operate within a complex system of social, economic, political, ecological "development". Meta-theory evolved as a reflection on the growing insights in a world full of contradictions in which socially innovative development initiatives came to life. The meta-theory used and brought together existent theories as much as (local) experiences and stories, in addition to empirical studies, public analysis and reactions. In doing so it provided growing insights into the potentials of such initiatives, the constraints they faced, and the multi-scalar institutional changes that were needed to allow them to exist (prototyping, designing, etc.). The meta-theory was regularly exposed to insights from ongoing research, try outs, communication campaigns and evaluations. This evolving meta-theory is the collective work of a consortium of actors (some of which changed over time as needed by the chain of activities) who brought their skills, insights, creations and modes of cooperation into the process.

This collective process, which defined each stage of every project, came with a wide and also evolving methodological diversity:
- *Consortium building:* involving networking and mobilization processes, ... Action and research with role sharing and switches across actors are often already symbiotic at the stage of consortium building.
- *Communication methods:* ranging from collective observation to open discussions and debates on values, objectives, strategies. Central to these were: visualization, design, prototyping, but also interdisciplinary multi-party analysis.
- *Modes of governance:* here, questions relating to how to build a Commons and how to govern it came to the fore. This involved developing methods

to reveal and respect the ethics of the consortium, based on SI criteria. These criteria refer to inclusive communication and decision-making, mutual aid, association in thought and action, reflection and self-criticism.

2. Susanne Elsen: On (And In) Action Research

Hilary Bradbury, who Susanne Elsen views as "the mother of Action Research in our time", defines AR around the idea of collaborative and reflexive action for social change:

> Action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work *with* practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desiredtu change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. We may therefore say that action research represents *a transformative orientation to knowledge creation in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers.* Action researchers do not readily separate understanding and action, rather we argue that only through action is legitimate understanding possible; theory without practice is not theory but speculation. (Bradbury, 2010, p.93)

Susanne Elsen's career brings to life different components of AR. As can be read in her academic/scientific profile, her work embodies AR as such:

> Her emphasis in research, teaching and development lies in social innovation, eco-social transformation and social and solidarity economy with a special focus on solutions for disadvantaged rural and urban areas. She combines participatory research strategies as cooperative and transdisciplinary knowledge production with approaches to sustainable social change and development, involving stakeholders and concerned people. (Elsen, n. d.)

This definition of AR comes close to the one presented in the previous section, identifying targets and co-producing solutions for disadvantaged rural and urban areas. In particular, as a review of Susanne Elsen's publications sug-

gests, her various work domains are particularly concerned with "Community based solidarity economy and eco-social transformation"[3]. Building or cohering community is a central concern in pursuing eco-social transformation. In this contribution I am mainly interested in learning about how she works with her AR partners.

2.1   Work Domains

How has Susanne Elsen taken on different AR roles in the domains she has worked in? Most of her work over the last thirty years focuses on community development, community-based solidarity economy, socio-ecological transition strategies and the manner in which these provide solutions for disadvantaged urban and rural areas. As a professor in social work, she has co-developed community development strategies and methods that do not fit the manual of mainstream Social Work. In my opinion, Susanne Elsen expresses the focus of her work quite well in the following:

> Community-based social and solidarity economy, against this background, is to be considered in the context of a transformative social policy and an extended understanding of eco-social work that empowers especially disadvantaged groups to claim extensive rights and prerequisites of work and life. This is not only a question of individual rights and emancipatory requirements, but it is also an urgent need of societies to provide people with the capabilities to act and to take responsibility for themselves, for their community and their livelihood. (Elsen, 2019, p. 52)

Her conception of social and solidarity economy (SSE) is very much in tune with the inclusive definition given by Utting (2015), recognizing the diversity of activities and modes of action within the wide domain of SSE – a definition to which she refers in her work:

> Social and Solidarity Economy involves not only traditional social economy or third sector organizations and enterprises such as cooperatives, mutual associations,

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3   Which is also the title of one of her papers (Elsen, 2018) and inspired the title of her book *Eco-Social Transformation and Community-Based Economy* (Elsen, 2019).

grant-dependent and service-delivery non-governmental organizations and community- and other forms of volunteering and giving, but also myriad types of self-help-groups, organizing to produce goods and services, fair trade, networks and other forms of solidarity purchasing, consumer groups, involved in collective provisioning, associations of informal economy workers, new forms of profit- making social enterprises and social entrepreneurs, and NGOs that are having to shift from a dependence on donations and grants to sustaining themselves via income-generating activities. Various forms of solidarity finance, such as complementary currencies and community-based saving schemes, are part of SSE, as are some digital crowdfunding and sharing schemes associated with the collaborative economy. (Utting, 2015)

I usually dislike to cite such long excerpts. But this "list" of diverse SSE activities really works inspiringly. It is inspiring in at least four ways. First, it underscores the diversity of the SSE. Second, it includes activities that are not necessarily 'economic' in their existential essence, such as self-help groups. Third, it implicitly favors activities that do not naturally depend on donations and grants from "outside" actors but seeks funding in sharing schemes. Fourth, this excerpt breathes solidarity and community dynamics – which one would assume natural for a scholar bred in community work.

This four-pronged source of inspiration makes me wonder if or where a boundary between SSE and other socially innovative activities should be drawn.   In fact, as a SI scholar I always wonder why so many authors and activists immediately think of Social Innovation as Social Economy "only". Many other activities such as socio-cultural initiatives, educational activities, neighborhood and locality committees and councils, support, care, and peer groups, among others, are most of the time socially innovative but not economic in essence. But at the same time – and the slim border lines crisscrossing the above enumeration suggests this – many SES activities depend for their reproduction on their social dynamics, such as the reproduction of their social relations. They are socially innovative in the sense that they satisfy needs not satisfied by state or market, capacitating people that have poor chances of finding a place in both the economy and the community. But such empowerment is only possible if it is built-up through intensive bonding and solidarity

practices. Susanne Elsen's and her colleagues' work on and with "social agri-culture", witnesses of this capacitation or enabling approach and the social dynamics it involves. Elsen et al. (2020):

> La definizione di Agricoltura Sociale include un ampio spettro di attività pedago-giche, preventive e terapeutiche, di risocializzazione e d'integrazione, svolte in con-testi agricoli e a favore dei gruppi target del settore sociale, educativo e sanitario. Questo nuovo approccio fra attività sociale e attività agricola permette lo sviluppo di sinergie particolari a vantaggio degli utenti, dei fornitori di servizi e delle comu-nità, e favorisce l'innovazione dei sistemi educativi, sociali e sanitari. (p. ix)[4]

Social agriculture has shown its value in creating community and economy spaces that manage to resist the pressure of the market, to foster organic agri-culture and revive ancient crops, to nourish ailing rural communities, to give new chances to people with "lower market economic potential" – all of which resonates social innovation concerns: "reluctant to dive into the whirlpools of wildcat market processes" – to find creative employment or to valorise their traditional farming and land preservation skills. Dynamics in these socio-ag-ricultural activities can be considered as a process of active citizenship for-mation, in which people of different social belonging take on active socio-po-litical roles such as mediation between community actors and members, com-munication between them and other communities,   community representa-tion and political mobilization (Wamuchiru, 2017).
In her work during the last decade, Susanne has brought to life a diversity of socio-economic and social initiatives that facilitate socio-ecological transition and the development of society (Elsen, n. d.).

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4   The definition of Social Agriculture includes a broad spectrum of pedagogical activities (both preventive and therapeutic) related to re-socialization and integration. These are carried out in agricultural contexts to benefit target groups in the social, educational and health sectors. This new approach between social work and agricultural activity allows the development of particular synergies that benefit users, service providers and communities, and favors the innovation of educational, social and health systems. (author's translation)

2.2   Susanne Elsen as an Action Researcher

Susanne Elsen works as an Action Researcher. A researcher who combines roles in various action and research activities with a social purpose. In this way, she (like many of her colleagues) favors social innovation in research and action by building democratic relations of cooperation between actors in different roles, by taking on board the needs and capacities of these actors and by providing space and time for mutual caring among all participants. It is worth observing that in Susanne's perspective the terms that convey stylized roles, such as *clients*, *patients*, etc. become obsolete or receive an emancipatory interpretation as people looking for their way in life.

Susanne Elsen's "Lernschule", her formation as an action researcher, can be traced back to the professional trajectory she started in Trier (1983–1995). There was no manual for becoming an action researcher. She developed this specific profession as an activist, developer, researcher and university teacher and by working with people in disadvantaged life situations. These people's conditions were often linked to an alienated self-image reinforced by (negative) visions from the "outside", as well as to their real-life situation (dealing with bad housing in ecologically damaged neighborhoods, a precarious income, disconnection from social and political networks, transportation poverty, etc.). She explains the social context of the collective engagement:

> This was the outcome of our community work and of the integrated community-based development approach [of these 11 years in Trier], a research- and development project of the University of Trier. It has later been the pilot of the social political model in Germany "Soziale Stadt", an integrated urban development programme.[5] However, we as pioneers did not have the financial and conceptual preconditions to work in this mode so we had to develop it on site with the concerned people and stakeholders. It took at least three years for me to understand the field

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5   The "Soziale Stadt" is based on the Integrated Area Development model which was the center piece in the European Projects Integrated Area Development and SINGOCOM projects, which I coordinated and in which Hartmut Häußermann participated as the German partner (Häußerman & Walther, 2018).

[of community development] and its people; I came from industry, without any experience of community work[6].

She describes the methodology of reflexive mobilization used in the research community in Trier, led by Prof. Ries, in terms of *activating inquiry:*

But I had a very good mentor, my Swiss doctoral supervisor, Heinz Ries, sociologist/ psychologist, who worked as a professor at the University of Trier and was an activist already in 1956 Hungary and other places[7]. That this community work was Action Research—we did not become aware of until much later. We worked in a participatory, co-production way; we developed our methodology as we went. We used mapping, focus groups, a.s.o. to implement a big activating inquiry with the whole community. We organized groups of citizens around certain topics such as waste, green spaces etc. Many people became 'multipliers' who diffused the idea of starting change through self-organization – not waiting for actors who would not care for this part of the city. We started (prepared) meetings, inviting decision makers who were responsible for the miserable situation and confronted them with the misery.

She elaborates further on her role in Action Research:

People did not see me as an academic; they saw me in this community center (Bürgerhaus Trier-Nord) and came to speak with me. I recognized their skills in coping with their life situations; and they trusted me after a certain time, and recognized me as a person who could be helpful in addressing their needs. We started to build up groups with the objective of coming to common purposes on issues such as housing, traffic, environment etc. We prepared meetings with a diversity of actors responsible for these policy domains. These empowerment processes are extremely important for building communities.

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6   All unsourced quotes of Susanne Elsen pertain to the mentioned dialogue held in October 2022.

7   Heinz Ries is recognized as the father of the Soziale Stadt in Nord-Trier.

Susanne Elsen explains that in addition to organizing meetings, they also walked the community, organized activating inquiries (going door-to-door in the community), applied the traditional approach of AR working with students from the university and created operational groups in which individuals could insert their special competences and interests. It was a process of ongoing empowerment based on building infrastructures with the people in the community; in particular, this included a housing cooperative that took over public housing and invested in renovation and adaptation for big and small families, thereby creating work and building skills.

Community work also involved the setting up of youth activities ranging from childcare to actual education and professional training, which often provided opportunities for insertion into the labor force. But most relevant from an AR point of view is the reflexive development of various roles by 'users' of the services: parents become care takers, and from that experience they also become eligible as caretakers for elderly. The group dynamics and personal experiences were also key triggers for building cooperatives in domains other than housing and education. Sports clubs for women and men arose, thus creating new opportunities to talk, share experiences. In such an environment, new ideas for supporting women or families in the neighborhood who had problems (e.g. domestic violence) developed. For example, in the Bürgerhaus a family advice center was set up.[8] The Bürgerhaus also provided space for artistic activities:

> The rooms were a resource; there were young artists who came from outside who asked to use a big room for an exhibition. People from the neighborhood came to visit but in response they started their own exhibition on the walls outside of their houses in the community. This was funny because they took out their own pictures from their houses and also produced their own murals and asked for an entrance fee.

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8   Susanne Elsen was Director of the Bürgerhaus from 1983 to 1994.

Of course, participation does not automatically lead to (co)production. There is the need for financial resources, which requires professionally prepared negotiation with civil servants, investors, architects, "Armani suit wearing males" and more. The main challenge here was to convince all parties of the shared benefit. But this was not easy. Participation is something you learn by doing. The old generation architects, for example, were very bad at this and came with their designs and plans and the sincere expectation that they would be accepted without protest. Fortunately, today's architects and planners are trained in participatory and co-design methods. But real estate developers still profess the religion of highest land rent.

We should not be illusionary about the chances of reaching an agreement among partners with different interests. In one of her recent experiences in South Tyrol (2019–2022), Susanne Elsen was involved in the project "Filiera dell'agricoltura responsabile" (FARm), which focused on the exploitation of agricultural workers in four Northern Italian provinces. The project aimed to build a network of different actors with conflictive interests in order to reach a sort of "common sense" for avoiding worker exploitation and to build up an effective exploitation prevention strategy in northern Italy. She explains this in detail:

> Actors in FARm came from different worlds (labour unions, farmers association, police, third sector enterprises, cooperatives etc.). First, we mapped these actors, trying to find out who was who with which interest and which mandate. With this socio-political map you can visualise power and powerlessness among actors. As you are on the side of the powerless, you need to invest in community organizing strategies, which is a key element in emancipatory AR. Understanding these power relations is essential for understanding the situation and knowing how to act and with whom. In the end and after intensive bargaining, we came up with a common declaration against exploitation in agriculture.

The process itself engaged societal stakeholders in rethinking the issue beyond the lense of their exclusive interest and to incorporate new points of view. The role of the university, as Hilary Bradbury puts it, is "especially important for the potential to convene stakeholders for change in ways that overcome jurisdictional fragmentation" and can contribute to a process of social transformation, if it conceives "action research as residing in the space that can integrate truth and power" (Bradbury, 2010, p. 109).

This leads us to the role of vision development based on shared values and ethics (i.e. visions-supporting projects). Personal ethical foundations (e.g. generated through education, family life, personal and social experiences, taking part in collective projects, ...) are important for participating in shared visioning. Stories, experiences and hope shared among all participants are essential building blocks for developing a common vision. Mediators or leaders in AR have the potential of asking the right questions — mainly connecting with people's experiences, needs and wishes. The ability or skill to initiate competence dialogues with "the losers" is an effective instrument. "What would you do if…"? "Is there something you would like to change?" It is also important to open minds towards existing or possible opportunities and real utopias occurring in other places. Relying on effective alternatives helps keep off killer arguments such as: "This is not possible because it is too expensive, there is no societal support, etc."

Co-learning is a strategic ingredient of effective AR. Susanne explains how they learned how to interact with local politicians and public servants and in which settings to do so; and they [local politicians] learned to listen to their messages:

> For instance, if there are elections: either at the beginning or during a change in the government of a province or land, there is the possibility of providing party leaders with ideas because they need them and they solicit ideas from the segment of the populations whom they seldom reach — such as people living in deprived neighborhoods. In election campaigns you can also give them ideas, which they do not necessarily remember once in office.

> [In Trier] together with Heinz Ries, we regularly visited the representatives of the different political parties at the local level not to ask for favors, but to provide them with substantial information about the situation in that part of the city. A typical introductory sentence went as "We know you are very interested in the situation of…" even if we knew that they would like to ignore it.

Another strategic ingredient of AR, besides co-learning, is that of developing professional skills. To learn to work cooperatively requires social workers and activists:

> [This involves] enabling people to work cooperatively, taking steps towards self-organizing – because self-organization is something you need to learn and experience. You need to learn a lot also from history: why did some initiatives fail, and others work? These "lessons" are very important. How did initiatives and their organizations evolve: their embeddedness, the capacity to cooperate internally and with the environment, to self-organize in democratic way.

In a later stage of her career (from 1994 onwards), Susanne changed her role in AR and became a (supportive) researcher and a member of organizations fostering and supporting cooperative economies. She did not actually work in these organizations (as she did in her Trier experience for example) but along with other scholars and collaborators developed criteria of social innovation in these action fields, as well as provided actors with criteria in understanding and communicating their work. She explains:

> When you are involved in self-organized structures, you often become blind to your own innovative work. I was in such a situation sometimes in Germany. I mirror actors' work according to criteria of social innovation and integration and focus more on asking the right questions than on giving advice.

In the role of supportive researcher, as in other roles in AR, trust building and reflexive practices are of key importance:

> Talking with them [the actors], posing Socratic questions – not in a technical way, not top down – showing real interest, conducting interviews with them (deep interviews like we are doing here)[9] – is central. Really, the most impressive experiences working together with Luca Fazzi in Southern Italy was with the actors in social agriculture cooperatives fighting organized crime, trying to develop a legal ground to stand up. AR requires a long time and digging deep to understand those contexts and actors. Here I also experienced how interviewees open a box only if there is a trust base and if they see and feel that you are really interested in them and not only in a thrilling story.

Susanne Elsen has cultivated a network of transformative research in which collaborative relations can flourish between scholars focused less on academic competition and more on generating an impact on social justice and sustainability issues in society.

3. The Future of Action Research: Learning From Susanne

Situating Susanne's practice of AR within the wider realm of AR, several particular points of attention for the future of AR come to the fore. Let us look at three of them.

Language

The diversity of languages used by diverse actors in AR can be problematic but also holds potential. Scientific, public administration, social work terminology and phrasing can put people off who on a daily basis suffer from deprivation—including being deprived of the use of their own existentially rooted language. Scientists have a tendency to abstract this experience, sense-based language from its context and to express concrete experiences in general terms, which they believe to be recognizable across places with similar experiences. In AR practice, this generalization of need and action situations does

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9   Referring to the dialogic interview between Susanne and myself.

not work by itself. There is a real need to have an ongoing dialogue between different languages, with the ambition of coming to a shared language among different actors. Translation, shared experiences, storytelling, ... can bring language down to earth but also transcend community experiences to universal change agendas that can drive collective action and policy making across places. The term "metatheory" holds this ambiguity: it hosts relevant concrete experiences in its metastructure, while in its ambition it continuously strives for generalization and abstraction. The diversity of languages also refers to the necessary diversity of forms of expression: publications of different styles and purposes, artistic expressions (theatre, video, movie-making, plastic arts, etc.), co-creations (community gardening, opening up spaces for common activities, etc.).

Training and Capacity Building
These activities in AR only work if they are interactive. It is against any communal or socially innovative logic to consider training or capacity building as a relationship that goes from "A to B" such as: professor teaches social agent how to organize a meeting, how to conduct interviews, how to build a project interactively, how to talk to a local politician, etc. Each agent in a community development project has a stake in the co-learning processes involved in organizing a meeting, developing a common language or setting up a dialogical context, building up a discourse to engage a local politician, organizing and implementing a community garden, etc. Of course, each agent will have their experience and can "teach" us what they know or have lived (through). But these communication moments are co-constructive steps, among many others, in a co-learning and collective capacity building process. These processes are also primordial in connecting community development experiences among each other—almost akin to the federation of community initiatives as strongly defended by anarchist activists and scholars.

From Training to Education[10]

Susanne Elsen and I had an interesting exchange on what Schools, Universities, Colleges do to people—students and teachers. In social work, public policy, social science, ... the mainstream flow has become increasingly instrumental(ist). Schools increasingly "teach" students how to do a job. And jobs are increasingly defined as fitting the system: These treat people in deprived situations as clients (not to say patients); offer them solutions that are *systemfähig* (job training, responding to the criteria imposed by the bureaucracy of the welfare system, leading patients toward the (mental) health care system, ...). Both the scientific and activist perspective are missing in this view of education. What we need in schools is co-learning to become Action Researchers in the natural sense of the term, with all actors moving together towards community building and mutual support and away from job and condition categorization, toward people and community bonding. Scientists and professionals can only have a role in this process if they learn the craft of AR from very early on in their educational curriculum.

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10   It would be great to confront the role of AR in education, research and activism with the definition of Social Work as negotiated at the heart of the IASSW General Assembly and IFSW general meeting in July 2014: "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being."

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