

# Action Research, Democracy and (Global)Citizenship

## Building bridges among traditions and practices

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**Abstract:** The theme of the 6<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the International Journal of Action Research invited participants to explore the role of Action Research on the edges that societies are facing today around the world.<sup>1</sup> Among these edges, citizenship as a necessary socio-political process to the functioning of democracy is of special relevance, and in a sense connects with all the other edges, from poverty and migration to climate change. The paper is intended to be an initial exploration of how Action / Participatory Research in its different traditions implicitly or explicitly conceives its role in the promotion of citizenship. The argument is that there is an important democratising legacy sometimes lost or forgotten in favor of a more instrumental approach for organisational functioning and productivity. Listening to some selected voices from Europe and Latin America will lead to the proposal of a framework for comparative studies on the theme.

**Keywords:** Action Research, democracy, global citizenship, comparative studies, learning from differences, systematization of experience

### **Investigación Acción, Democracia y Ciudadanía (Global):**

Construyendo puentes entre tradiciones y prácticas

**Resumen:** El tema del 6° Simposio de International Journal of Action Research invitó a los participantes a explorar el papel de la Investigación Acción en las aristas que enfrentan las sociedades hoy en todo el mundo. Entre estas aristas, la ciudadanía como proceso socio-político necesario para el funcionamiento de la democracia cobra especial relevancia, y en cierto sentido se conecta con todas las demás aristas, desde la pobreza y la migración hasta el cambio climático. El artículo pretende ser una exploración inicial de cómo la Investigación Acción/Participativa en sus diferentes tradiciones implícita o explícitamente concibe su papel en la promoción de la ciudadanía. El argumento es que existe un importante legado democratizador que a veces se pierde u olvida en favor de un enfoque más instrumental para el funcionamiento y la productividad organizacional. La escucha de algunas voces seleccionadas de Europa y América Latina conducirá a la propuesta de un marco de estudios comparativos sobre el tema.

**Palabras clave:** Investigación Acción, democracia, ciudadanía global, estudios comparados, aprender de las diferencias, sistematización de experiencias

1 “Action Research on the Edge” – IJAR 2022 Symposium, October 12–14, 2022, organized and promoted by Arama – Initiative in Action Research, Sabanci University, Istanbul.

## As introduction: Is there fire under the ashes?

Action Research, as other research methodologies and science in general, are today challenged to rethink their role. When the proponents of the 6<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the International Journal of Action Research invited participants to explore the edges of Action Research, they seemed to be suggesting that research may have its share of responsibility for the multifaceted crisis we are facing today and that are well known: hunger in many parts of the world, forced migrations, the installation of authoritarian regimes in many countries, drastic climatic changes and environmental degradation and disasters, to name a few. How does Action Research fit into this picture? Eventually, where can alternatives be anchored?

In these circumstances two simultaneous movements are called for. One of them is to acknowledge the myriad of innovative practices that can be found all over the world. A quick look at the articles published in the *International Journal of Action Research*, and other journals in the field, makes us aware that academics and practitioners are struggling to find ways to make a difference, and in different ways. In the last years I have been happy to see experiments in doctoral dissertations and master theses that constitute healthy methodological transgressions, for instance, mixing Action Research with Autobiography, developing creative strategies of participation in times of Covid-19 pandemic such as writing and sharing “pedagogical letters” for constructing the data corpus to be collectively analysed. These experiments are signs of the unrest which is an essential ingredient for any change.

The other movement is a return to the origins of what has become known as Action or Participatory Research. What were the original promises of Action Research, and to what degree have they been fulfilled? Are they still valid and necessary today? If they have been covered by ashes, are there some embers to be awakened and that can potentialise innovative practices and help to redefine the role of Action Research in today’s societies? The search for fire beneath the ashes is evinced through the frequent citations to what can be considered founders or “fathers/mothers” of the movement, such as Kurt Lewin, Eric Trist, Marja Lisa Swantz, Orlando Fals Borda and Paulo Freire, among many others.

There seems to be a general agreement that since its beginning Action Research, in its various formats, is related to the promotion of democracy. I will try to check this argument, and identify aspects that have been highlighted in some discussions in Europe and in Latin America, based on the assumption that different socio-political-cultural contexts will require and produce different approaches to actualise the democratising principle, and that the dialogue among these approaches is an important step towards the understanding of citizenship that, while necessarily linked to nationalities and states, today needs a broader scope given the global dimension of the problems facing humanity and planetary sustainability.

The boundaries of citizenship have shifted significantly in the last decades. Melissa S. William has summarized these boundary shifts in four categories: a) the boundaries of political and cultural identities, meaning that there is a rise in the number of individuals who hold dual citizenship or who have strong bonds of membership in more than one country, such as “diasporic communities”; b) with the trade increase and the rise of multinational corporations, the economic boundaries no longer coincide with the nation state; c) the political-institutional boundaries tend to be expanded through international agreements that generate binding decisions, such as the European Union and other regional initiatives; d) the boundaries of democratic participation are gaining in scope, having increasingly a transnational character,