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RESEARCH

Action Research Environments: Challenges for their Initiation and Sustainability

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Introduction

Morten Levin once described action research using the metaphor of a "Janus face" (Levin 2012). He explained that "one face views the incredible strength of having lived the field through involvement in a continuous and long-term ongoing change activity, while the mirrored face attends the striving for reflective distance and rigorous analysis that is challenged through empathic and political involvement" (Levin 2012, p. 133). Action researchers must simultaneously manage the two Janus perspectives, which is challenging because it involves many different tasks and competencies. Levin (2012) makes the argument that given the dual characteristics of the research process, working in an environment with other

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action researchers is particularly valuable as it enables action researchers to interpret and discuss solutions before any decisions are made, especially if they share experiences from the field. He further claims that the value of collegial discussions and reflections cannot be emphasised enough (Levin 2012). This requires the existence of an *action research environment*, which we define as "a community of people who connect through theoretical and conceptual discussions [on action research] and work together developing [action research] projects. But, above all, it is a community of people who have affective connections and a shared project with the aim of constructing something together." (Larrea 2020, p. 26).

The rationale of this paper is that, although the authors have experienced how action researchers create communities where they construct the approaches to action research that inspire their work with stakeholders —and have been part of and witnessed collaborative and also critical relationships among action researchers within and between these communities—very little has been published about how these communities come to exist, operate internally, and relate with others externally, nor what their life cycles look like.

Thus, based on this rationale, the article explores some features of one concrete environment that can later inspire new conceptual frameworks. The final aim is to help action researchers become aware of these dynamics in more systematic ways. The research question posed to learn from this case is: What core features are necessary for configuring an action research environment?

To delve into this question, we focus on the case of the action research environment of action research for territorial development (ARTD), which is deeply connected to the legacy of Morten Levin. More specifically, the core of ARTD is a revised version of the co-generative framework proposed by Morten Levin, together with Max Elden, for workplace development, which has been adapted for territorial development.

We begin by discussing the concept of an action research environment in the context of previous literature on action research. The empirical section of this article then focuses on how the ARTD environment developed in the Basque region in Spain, Rafaela (Santa Fé) and Tierra del Fuego in Argentina, and Agder in Norway. For this article, we were inspired by first-person action research for second-person action researchers (Larrea 2020) and facilitated a mutual inquiry process among the authors of this paper (all but one belongs to this environment). Through a series of questions, we prompted one another to reflect on our experience. These reflections, together with a timeline description of the development process, helped us derive important lessons that can respond to the research question and are beneficial to action researchers wanting to develop and nurture their action research environments.

The following section explores the theoretical framework for action research for territorial development (ARTD) as a field of research. Next, we provide a conceptual discussion of action research environments and describe how this particular action research environment was established. We then present the reflections of the action researchers in the environment whom we invited to offer their thoughts on their experience of being part of this environment. Finally, we conclude by proposing our eight lessons learnt and some final thoughts.

The Theoretical Approach at the Core of ARTD

This case was selected for this special issue because it holds a significant connection to Morten Levin, a central figure in the action research environment at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. There, over the years, he developed a pragmatic approach to action research primarily within industrial democracy and the transformation of workplaces (see, for example, Levin et al. 1997; Levin 2002). Part of the strategy to develop this environment was the doctoral programmes on enterprise development through action research, particularly the EDWOR programmes (Enterprise Development and Work Life Research), which he carried out in collaboration with other action researchers in the international action research community. Years later, a PhD student from this programme, James Karlsen, integrated an action research team in *Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness*[1] and brought the legacy of Industrial Democracy into a newly formed action research environment. The new environment developed a specific understanding of action research that was later named *action research for territorial development* (ARTD) (Karlsen and Larrea 2014; Karlsen 2024), which sought to improve the policymaking process for territorial development.

One of the pivotal contributions of Morten Levin to ARTD was the co-generative framework that he initially created with Max Elden (Elden and Levin 1991) and which reached the Basque team through the work he published together with Davydd Greenwood (Greenwood and Levin 1998/2007). This co-generative learning model, first introduced by Elden and Levin (1991), was designed as a framework for action research in organisational development. Its core principle is that both the researcher (the outsider) and the stakeholders or problem owners (the insiders) engage in the same development process, which begins with defining a problem based on real-world challenges (Levin 1993). The defined issue encourages experimentation through action research cycles, where the aim is to discover improved solutions. Through reflective processes, this experimentation fosters collective learning, which in turn promotes further learning and experimentation.

The co-generative learning model also features dual learning circles—one for insiders and one for outsiders—that are interconnected yet distinct. This structure allows insiders and outsiders to experience their own learning journeys (Levin 2004). Insiders possess deep knowledge of the specific context, informed by personal experience, including how things function, how elements are interconnected, and insights into values, attitudes, and local culture. However, this knowledge is often unsystematic, tacit, and unexamined (Elden & Levin 1991). On the other hand, outsiders bring expertise in systematic inquiry and analysis, research design, and pattern recognition, contributing to the creation of new theoretical knowledge.

When Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness decided to explore action research as a methodology that would contribute to its transformative mission in 2008, the work of Greenwood and Levin (2007) was the initial reference point, with the co-generative learning model inspiring the first action research processes facilitated by Orkestra researchers. Two of these researchers later published their proposal of ARTD in a book in 2014 (Karlsen and Larrea 2014), where this model was a core component. Additionally, the researchers proposed an adaptation of the framework, known as the co-generative

[1] Orkestra—Basque Institute of Competitiveness is an initiative of the University of Deusto, Spain, dedicated to analysing competitiveness and regional development through different lines of research.

framework of ARTD, which responded to the differences in the action research conducted in organisations versus in a territory. In practice, ARTD has mostly been developed in collaboration with different regional and local governments and their agencies, who invite other territorial actors involved in their policies (firms, firm associations, universities, technology centres, and vocational training centers) to participate. Consequently, the focus on territorial development has called for a renewed conceptual framework.

One of the differences in the new framework is that action research for territorial development is framed in territorial complexity, where a series of autonomous but interdependent actors (typically individuals representing organisations) collaborate without any entity having the power to instruct others on what is to be done. Furthermore, the positionality of participants differs when co-generating within the territory. Greenwood and Levin (2007) described the participants in an action research project as insiders and action researchers as (friendly) outsiders. But as Orkestra's action researchers soon discovered, they were not outsiders to the territory, and the other actors did not consider them as such either. Therefore, they positioned themselves as insiders in the territorial development processes, openly addressing the stakes of their organisation in the development process and acknowledging they were not neutral towards the processes and results of territorial development. This contrasts with Levin's stance, who claimed that the separation between the roles of the action researcher and the local actors is vital (Levin 2012).

Finally, the aim of action research is defined differently. The new co-generative framework includes the concept of collective knowing, defined as a capability, a learned pattern of collective action, where the actors in the territory systematically modify their actions over time through the learning process in territorial agoras. In the dialogue between action researchers and policymakers in ARTD, the agora has often been described as the capability to solve territorial problems together (Karlsen and Larrea 2014).

Exploring a New Concept for ARTD: Action Research Environments

The term *action research environment* has been used in the context of ARTD since its inception (Karlsen and Larrea 2014). Although the definition provided (see Introduction) allows for both action researchers and stakeholders to be considered part of the environment, it has been applied in practice to refer to action researchers. In the initial proposal of ARTD, this concept was used to argue that action researchers could not succeed in their endeavour to make action research meaningful and viable in the usual *research environments* at universities and other research organisations; thus, they needed *action research environments* with specific conditions and procedures that differed from what was mainstream in academia. However, the action research environment was not proposed as a conceptual category in ARTD, and while the definition we provided in the Introduction was published in 2020, it has yet to be conceptualised.

We are aware that what we define as an action research environment might have been studied in the literature under different terms, such as action research community, describing the community of all action researchers around the world (see Brydon-Miller and Coghlan 2014), and not the much smaller communities oriented to developing one specific praxis (shared practice and conceptualisation of a specific approach) which is what we are referring to. However, there are some relevant experiences that one might find useful from other research areas. For example, Salīte et al. (2020) use the term action research environment to refer to environments for international cooperation and open dialogue on the

reorientation of teacher education towards sustainability with a basis on the networking environment and the use of an action research approach. Nevertheless, they do not provide a definition or a conceptual framework.

A related concept is that of communities of practice. Mizrachi (2014) defines them as the following in the Action Research Encyclopedia edited by David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller: "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and sets of expertise or skills in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." He argues that communities of practice can be seen as a central component of action research by promoting both theory and practice. This definition closely relates to part of the experiences we will share in this article, and we could consider Zubigintza (one of the main spaces we will describe) as a community of practice. Nonetheless, we have not used it because the action research environment is more than Zubigintza.

In summary, reviewing action research handbooks and the encyclopedia shows that not only can we learn about individual action researchers and their specific projects but also that we have access to abstract conceptualisations of action research from various action research schools, families, and traditions (see, for instance, Bradbury-Huang 2015 and Reason and Bradbury 2001). Nonetheless, between these two levels that we can describe as micro and macro, we see action research environments as an understudied meso level, where we find groups of action researchers with high relational density, typically working under one specific tradition, and often connected to one or numerous universities or other types of research organisations. We believe this meso level deserves attention and should be nurtured because it can strengthen the relational bonds between action researchers globally, thereby making action research more relevant in the face of grand socio and ecological challenges. In this article, we explore the concept of action research environments and discuss what appear to be success factors and obstacles that arise during their establishment and their further development.

Developing the Action Research Environment

In this section, we begin exploring the answers to the research question. We first take a dynamic perspective on the environment presented to note its evolution. We have observed that the action research environment developed through various cycles. This was to be expected, as action research environments are not static in that they start, usually with a few action researchers, grow, and often weaken or even disappear. However, our experiences also show that during the life span of one environment, its members interact with others, and while the initial environment can weaken, its impact may persist in another context. That is how this case connects to Morten Levin, the Trondheim and the ARTD environments.

We start this narrative in 2007 when the research institute Orkestra was created, its mission being not only to *analyse* competitiveness in the Basque Country but also to *generate* it in this region. Some researchers considered that the institute needed to adopt different research methodologies from mainstream university approaches, as these were focused on producing academic publications or quantitative reports without involving a dialogue process with territorial actors. Therefore, in 2008, they proposed action research, which centred on generating change and transformation through praxis

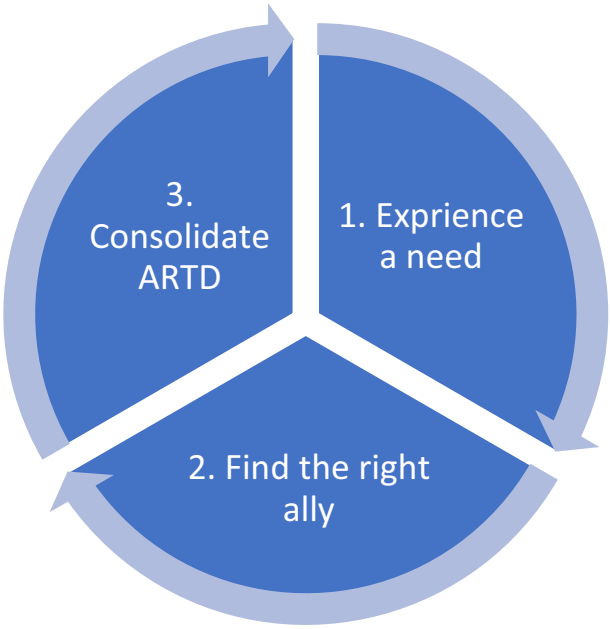

Fig. 1 Cyclical Development of ARTD

and dialogue between researchers and territorial actors. The development of the environment between 2008 and 2024 can be described through three cycles that follow a similar pattern, as the figure below illustrates (Fig. 1).

The cycles show how the action research environment developed in accordance with the participants' needs. To respond to these needs, allies with the right knowledge and experience were first sought out and then collaborated with to recreate that knowledge within the concrete contexts of ARTD.

First Cycle: Proposing ARTD as Both Academically Rigorous and Political (2007–2014)

ARTD emerged from practice before Orkestra was created. More specifically, it emerged in the research processes facilitated by one of the researchers in a county development agency together with another university-based researcher at that time. Although they had been educated in positivistic approaches, they intuitively transitioned to a different approach through the dialogue with stakeholders seeking new knowledge to solve their problems. Consequently, upon discovering action research and recognising the connections with their practice, they felt compelled to systematise their experience and present it as action research. They felt the need to do so because their practice had been criticised in Orkestra for not being research. They believed that if they could argue it was action research, other researchers would accept it as valid research. To accomplish this, they had to relate their experience to academia and its frameworks.

To fulfil this need, they approached a Norwegian researcher during an international seminar in 2008. He had been trained as an action researcher in one of the EDWOR PhD programmes led by Morten Levin, among others. He agreed to the challenge of collaborating with the researcher who had worked in development agencies to articulate her action

research experience in a language that academia (and, therefore, other researchers in Orkestra) would accept. Not only did he become an ally for Orkestra, but he also became a part-time associate researcher there. Thus, by building on and systematising the experiences with the county development agencies, Orkestra, and the first big long-term action research project with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, these two authors proposed *Action Research for Territorial Development* in a book they published in 2014 (Karlsen and Larrea 2014). The goal of this first significant action-research project was to develop social capital in Gipuzkoa to improve its competitiveness, and through the years, it generated a new multilevel collaborative governance.

However, they felt that there was no space in the proposed frameworks for the political dimension of their practice. Their encounter with Pablo Costamagna from the National Technological University[2] in Rafaela (Santa Fé, Argentina), and having connected with the work of Paulo Freire, forged another alliance. This alliance helped conceptualise the constant tension in ARTD between the requirements of academia and the explicit recognition of the political nature of action research.

All the previous discussions were deeply embedded in the practice of researchers and policymakers, especially after some action researchers joined a programme led by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, named Gipuzkoa Sarean (Gipuzkoa Networked). This programme was the main arena for ARTD until 2014, when the second significant ARTD project started with the City Council of Bilbao. Once again, the objective was to generate collaborative forms of governance in the area of knowledge-intensive business services.

At the end of this period, the environment was made up of five local and two foreign action researchers.

Second Cycle: Understanding the Context of Policymakers as Stakeholders (2014–2019)

After the publication of the book in 2014 and other publications in later years (Costamagna & Larrea 2018; Estensoro 2015; Karlsen and Larrea 2014), ARTD became more accepted in Orkestra. Having two significant projects based on this methodology also helped.

At this stage, a new need emerged. ARTD followed a pluralistic approach that combined not only experiential and process knowledge but also disciplinary knowledge. However, none of the action researchers working with policymakers had been educated in political or policy sciences, prompting them to seek ways to integrate knowledge from those fields to better facilitate policy processes with stakeholders. As a result, one of the action researchers took a PhD, and the team started exploring the intersection of policy sciences and action research (Arrona 2019). This necessity also led to collaboration with academics in policy sciences who were exploring action research, such as Koen Bartels and Julia Wittmayer (Bartels & Wittmayer 2019), among others. One of the outcomes of this collaboration was the definition of *soft resistance* as a core feature of ARTD (Arrona & Larrea 2019). Soft resistance combines the relational role of action researchers, where they collaborate with territorial actors to do what is possible (which often means not meeting all the action research ideals), with the critical role, where they generate critical awareness on why those ideals are not feasible in the project. Another relevant contribution of this

[2] Pablo Costamagna and his colleagues later created the Praxis Institute for Social Research in 2014, which is part of the ARTD environment.

path is the development of collaborative governance as a core feature of ARTD, not only conceptually but also in the projects co-generated with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and the City Council of Bilbao. The environment remained stable during this period, even though larger collaboration networks with international researchers were established.

Third Cycle: Seeking the Well-being of Action Researchers as well(2019-ongoing)

Eventually, new PhD students joined the environment and remained part of it. Yet, although there was a growing community of action researchers engaged in ARTD, not everybody felt ARTD belonged to them. Members of the community often referred to the co-generation framework as 'Karlsen and Larrea's framework', indicating a need to overcome this stage, strengthen the environment's identity, and help every participant feel that ARTD was theirs. It became apparent that, in some way, it was not only stakeholders in the projects who needed to be considered but also action researchers and their relationships. Added to this was the fact that many years of struggling to develop ARTD had left some researchers tired. Therefore, there were relational and emotional needs in the environment.

To face the relational challenge, the decision was made to write a collective book, later entitled 'Roots and Wings of Action Research for Territorial Development' (Larrea 2020), where each member of the community would have a chapter, sharing their contribution to ARTD, thus helping them make it their own. Another decision was to name the community, which was a way to reinforce it. The name chosen was *Zubigintza* (Bridging, in the Basque Language). The facilitation of the community meetings was also rotated, contributing to a more shared sense ofresponsibility for developing ARTD. Finally, in response to the tiredness felt by action researchers at Orkestra, who could not meet all the demands of stakeholders for action research processes (there were proposals to develop new and bigger projects), a recruitment process was initiated. Rather than looking for individuals with a specific education in research, Orkesta sought out young professionals with capabilities for action research (relational capabilities and the ability to extract lessons from practice). Eight young researchers were hired and, in different stages, joined a training process on ARTD that lasted almost two years. At the end of this process, seven of them joined Zubigintza. Thus, the environment has undergone a significant transformation, and the organisation has clearly invested in the future of ARDT and the action research environment. Finally, a researcher who was then based at the University of British Columbia in Canada joined Zubigintza. She was the first researcher to join this community who was not affiliated with Orkestra, Praxis, or Agder University.

Beyond the growth of the environment in terms of the number of participants in Zubigintza, new collaborations were forged. Among the international researchers directly collaborating with many of the members of this environment was Hilary Bradbury, who helped introduce first-person action research and self-development.

The previous paragraph describes a process where there was a need to consider the well-being of action researchers as well as that of stakeholders. Since the environment was growing, it was important that new members felt not only welcome but also that they were owners of the process. Simultaneously, the initial members needed a respite, which required someone else to take the relay. As in the previous cycles, there was an ally that helped address these processes.

A First-Person Perspective of Developing the Action Research Environment

We have argued that an action research environment is much more than the concepts and frameworks it proposes and uses, the formal alliances made, the academic production, or the specific projects. We are talking about communities of people who have affective connections and a shared project that seeks to construct something together. Thus, we considered it relevant to share some of the participant's experiences of the internal life of the ARTD environment, specifically, six of the authors of this paper, who have long-term experience in it. While the second author is a member of the Trondheim environment, she is not a complete outsider to the ARTD environment, as she connected with it through a research visit. The dialogue between the authors bonds both environments.

In this context, we have facilitated a mutual inquiry process where the authors of this paper have helped each other reflect on our experience through a series of questions. This process could also be interpreted as insider action research (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), given that it will contribute to our efforts to improve our research environments.

Part of the dialogue between us, the authors, took place in a written form, and this section is based on those writings. By keeping them as quotes and maintaining the distinct voices, we believe it is easier to understand the dynamics in the environment.

We have structured the answers around three core questions:

a) What does it mean to be part of this action research environment?
b) Why and how did the action research environment emerge and grow?
c) How can the environment be more sustainable in the future?

The first two questions prompt the action researchers to reflect upon the past, while the last question invites them to reflect on the future. We will present their responses to the three questions consecutively.

What it Means to be Part of this Action Research Environment

In this section, we describe what being part of an action research environment means for the authors of this paper who are involved in the the ARTD environment.

In the mutual inquiry process, the relational and development/growth dimension is probably the most evident perspective. We have selected some quotes to share this idea:

> "We share an affective relationship and a deep collective commitment to facilitate the transformation of our territories. These characteristics make it unique; I am not part of any other academic community of this nature."
> "I think the good relationships among the people who are part of the environment have created bonds that have strengthened the sense of belonging and the feeling of being part of a community, acting as a supportive security space in hard times and hostile moments. They have served as a driver for advancing collectively and have fostered a willingness to construct things together."
> "I have emotional support, a space for academic reflection, long-term and institutionalised relationships with stakeholders, colleagues with whom I can debrief my processes, and a shared project to look forward to."

> "Being part of this action research environment means I have a safe space to grow and develop my capabilities as an action researcher. It means being part of a microcosmos where I am constantly testing and sharpening my relational capabilities because we are all so aware of them since we work with them."

Multiple references connected to a collective identity also emerged:

> "It means belonging to a particular family of action researchers, and this comes with feelings of empowerment and responsibility (to take care of it and help it grow). […] When I have participated in [other] learning spaces, I have always felt that I somehow represent this action research environment and not only myself."
> "For me, it means feeling a sense of belonging to a unique academic community."
> "Being part of this action-research environment means that I am not alone in the endeavour of making action-research relevant in our territories and academic communities."

Why and how the Action Research Environment Emerged and Grew

When reflecting on the inception of the ARTD environment, two local researchers and their roles have been mentioned. One of these roles involved organisational transformation, and the other methodological transformation:

> "The entrepreneurship of the two initial proponents (R1 and R2) was relevant. Nobody had heard about action research in Orkestra in 2007. Integrating it into the institute combined organisational innovation, together with an entrepreneurial process to create a new methodology adapted to the needs of Orkestra."
> "[they] searched for ways to improve their relationship with the territory. They were generous, open-minded, and had the perseverance to articulate a group of researchers who shared epistemological positions and had a great deal of energy to build collectively."

These contributions have been described by their colleagues and co-authors of this paper as follows:

> "[R2] has led the methodological and conceptual development of an action research approach (ARTD), which is "the object" that has given sense to and articulated a community of research and practice."
> "Her [R2's] approach to developing ARTD and the research journey was a collective one - not an individual pursuit as is most common in academic careers- hence, it meant creating spaces and mechanisms for capacity building and network building."
> "[Another feature that explains the growth of the environment is] the support that action research has received from R1, who has been director general of Orkestra for over a decade."
> "Her [R2's] leadership has been key to providing institutional support for the development of the AR environment by legitimising action research (both discursively and through actions)."

This process, however, was not without tensions between action researchers and non-action researchers, and the two individuals mentioned in the previous quotes were precisely the ones who addressed them in the mutual inquiry process. R2 explained how she experienced these in the initial stages:

> "There have been tensions in the organisation between those proposing action research and other researchers. The initial proposal that action research was appropriate in order to materialise the mission of Orkestra to transform our territories was understood by some researchers as an affirmation that the other research approach was not good enough."

R1 complemented this perspective by writing about how she still experiences this tension:

> "I experience tensions because of my dual role; I am an action researcher and also the general manager of a research institute. As a researcher, I can decide on my research approach. As a general manager, I believe in the value of the AR approach for the development of our institute's mission, but I feel I have to be respectful of other approaches to research, too. In the AR environment, I feel that some people would want me to maintain a firmer stance on action research. On the other hand, I think that some non-action researchers feel I value action research more than other approaches and, thus, that I undervalue them. My main conflict is how to be careful with this balance."

The organisational level has also emerged as relevant, with the focus shifting between Orkestra's institutional setting and the three organisations that constitute the ARTD environment:

> "[Orkestra's] institutional setting [has been relevant]: […] the explicit mission to generate change, the organisational structure that fosters collaboration with territorial actors, and the leaders' belief in the fundamental value of AR to better contribute to the mission of the organisation."
> "The process is based on several organisations -Orkestra, the University of Agder, and Praxis (UTN FRRa)- that support (especially Orkestra) the development of new ideas and their related practices with decisions, time, and funds."
> "Another source of legitimacy was found in international networks, namely stable research-oriented (Agder) and practice-oriented (Praxis) partners in Norway and Argentina, respectively. These core connections played an important role in weaving ARTD's broader international network. And, of course, in building capabilities."

Finally, stakeholders, specifically local and regional governments, and their support have been mentioned as a relevant factor for the growth of the environment:

> "The public institutions that have financially supported action research projects […] have been key for the conceptual and methodological development of ARTD in practice, and for providing opportunities and resources to expand teams and generate capabilities. Moreover, if we consider the environment in a broader sense, it has allowed us to create an action research environment that is not only made up of researchers but also practitioners."
> "The support of policymakers in those governments [stakeholders in the two big institutionalised long-term programmes] has also been significant."
> "A major factor is results. Two of Orkestra's long-standing projects with local stakeholders are action research projects that have been maintained even when the ruling political parties have changed. This boosted the legitimacy of action research and ensured a stable source of resources for Orkestra."

How to Make the Environment Sustainable in the Future

From the past and the requirements for initiating an action research environment, we now move to the present and the future to reflect on how the ARTD environment could be sustainable. The reflections on the future are focused on two dimensions linked to the growth of the environment during these last years: (a) the young generation that has recently entered the environment and (b) the participation of researchers from different geographical places and multiple cultures.

The authors of this paper have long-term experience as members of the ARTD environment. We start by sharing the perspectives of the two of them who directly referred to the new generation of action researchers. Both have been directly working with the group of young researchers in their initial training process and the facilitation of Zubigintza:

> "When we initiated this process, all we had was a very strong commitment, and everything else had to be built. The people that were incorporated later found much better conditions to do action research, but easier does not necessarily mean that they have the same level of commitment and energy. The only way for them to have that level of commitment is to feel that ARTD is their own; if they do that, they will transform it by following their own path. Transformation is the key to the sustainability of the environment. If ARTD stagnates and remains the same, the environment will get stuck."
>
> "It is essential to make this research environment attractive to younger generations and to foster an intergenerational dialogue that helps young action researchers learn from the experience of older action researchers and, most importantly, to develop their own approach. Currently, this is already being done with the group of young doctoral researchers who joined Orkestra and are completing their AR dissertations. Their interest in following this research path is, of course, due to their own personal interest and characteristics, and, therefore, it is important that they find an environment that encourages them and makes sure that the specific characteristics of their chosen approach to research are considered and not measured in terms of papers published in high-ranking disciplinary journals, for instance. The current generation of action researchers at Orkestra has advanced in this direction, but there is still more to be done. And then there is the outside world. If being an action researcher stands as an impediment in the future for them to be able to move to other academic institutions or to follow an academic career because they are not publishing in traditional disciplinary journals, this broader context may discourage young people from following the action research path."

When asked about current tensions in the action research environment, some other researchers with long-term experience also referred to the young researchers:

> "There have also been some tensions regarding intergenerational roles and spaces."
>
> "A group of young researchers working on action research projects in Orkestra has joined the environment. They all have different backgrounds and, therefore, different approaches to ARTD. […] One example of these tensions is how difficult it is to balance the need to give a voice to and facilitate the participation of younger people who, having joined in recent years, may feel 'overshadowed' by the more experienced researchers while also giving space to those with extensive experience who have a unique knowledge so that we can all advance."

> "I would highlight a particular tension which has been present in learning and methodological development spaces: the tension existing between, on the one hand, sophistication and methodological-conceptual advancement and, on the other hand, making these spaces "accessible" for new members who still have not developed knowledge about action research."

To complement these perspectives from the authors of this paper, we have invited the recently incorporated researchers to share theirs as well. We present quotes from two of them below:

> "I think that action research and action research for territorial development can help overcome intergenerational deficiencies because they seek epistemic justice. […] Maybe we do not need to understand methodological sophistication "upwards", and that it is possible to gain methodological sophistication horizontally, exploring ways to open spaces."
>
> "Rather than feeling the space is my own […], I feel it belongs to others, and I have been accepted in it. I am very aware that this is a limitation I have put upon myself, and it is not real. But even though I do not want that, I feel my mind has created this image, which prevents me from realising that I can contribute to the group and that beyond being enriched by the discussions, I also have things that can enrich the group. It is probably this that pushes me to take on an "observer role", and that is why my mind hears that my role now is to learn from others as if we will never reach the moment when those around me can learn from me."
>
> Finally, the mutual inquiry process conducted to write this paper helped reveal an aspect that has seldom been explicitly discussed in the ARTD environment, perhaps because of the tensions inherent to its development: multiculturality.
>
> Multiculturality was initially related to how the participants from the Basque Country (Spain), Rafaela (Argentina), and Agder (Norway) worked together to develop ARTD. Lately, the incorporation of new participants from Argentina and Mauritius (though living in Canada) has intensified this awareness of different cultures living together in this process.

Zubigintza, the core meeting space for the members of the environment, works in Spanish, which has always made participation difficult for members in the Agder environment. However, English has also been perceived as a barrier for the Argentinian author of this paper, who mostly refers to international events with other action researchers:

> "Language is something that works as a barrier/tension. In my case, I do not get to understand everything because the core of the dialogue in international networks is in English, and not speaking this language is a barrier."

A critique of Eurocentrism is also made by the Argentinian author, which is also shared by a Basque (thus European) member of the community. We present both contributions together:

> "Another tension is that it is not clear to me whether the contribution we make from the South, from Argentina, is valued by all the members of this environment, especially those working in Europe."
>
> "The newcomers from the University of British Columbia (Canada) and Praxis Institute in Rafaela (Argentina) […] undoubtedly enrich the environment and are necessary for it to progress, but this growth also generates tensions. […] The contextual conditions of each participant have been used as an excuse to avoid exchange and

learning from each other […]. For instance, I think that I -and other colleagues- disconnect too easily whenever we feel there is a cultural/contextual distance in what we are exchanging."

Finally, the contribution from a Mexican member of Orkestra who has lived in the Basque Country for many years illustrates the complexity of multicultural environments where the limits between different cultures cannot be interpreted simplistically:

"The tensions that I have experienced within this action research environment are personal and perhaps not recognisable by my colleagues and are mainly about finding my own place and role. And this is very much linked to my own identity. Although I am from the Global South, I have always felt that my colleagues from the Global South within this research environment do not recognise me as such. It could be due to the fact that I have lived in the Global North for so long, or maybe because the Global South in this research environment has a set place and role. It might be a mixture of both. […]. Additionally, not speaking the Basque language was a hindrance in the early days, both for communicating and engaging with the team of action researchers from Orkestra and with the main local stakeholders (I understand that, of course). So, in a way, my experience of this action research environment is with the action research environment itself and not through shared research projects with stakeholders. And I experience this with a certain tension. Nevertheless, it has helped me to develop a place and role as a facilitator of a learning space for this research environment and to connect from there with other action research environments. […] It is, overall, incredibly enriching."

Discussion

Through the discussion presented in this chapter, we respond to the research question: What core features are necessary for configuring an action research environment? Our answer is evidently not theoretical in the sense that we do not mean that all action research environments have these features, nor that these are all features of action research environments. Our response to the research question is based on the process we have reflected on.

Therefore, our main goal with the discussion of this case is to extract some lessons learnt about the characteristics of action research environments that could be helpful for action researchers who are looking to develop or nurture such environments.

Based on the experiences of the ARTD environment, the eight main lessons learnt that respond to the research question are:

1. Initiating the new environment required an entrepreneurial process that involved a very high level of engagement from the entrepreneurs.

We are aware that some readers of this article might be interested in initiating the development of action research environments connected to their universities, research organisations, or other types of spaces where action research can be useful. The case illustrates an initiation process that is now remembered as positive but challenging in that integrating action research in contexts where other research approaches are mainstream can generate tensions. Another relevant lesson learnt is that initiating something demands an entrepreneurial attitude, which, in this case, emerged in two distinct forms: organi-

sational and methodological. These two aspects seem to have developed in conjunction with each other.

2. A new way of doing action research was practised, conceptualised, and proposed.

ARTD did not emerge linearly through researchers reading about and conceptualising action research and then practising it. Instead, practice came first as an evolution of other approaches to research. After some years, that specific practice was conceptualised, using the co-generative learning framework by Morten Levin and colleagues as a reference point and elaborating on the differences between industrial democracy and action research for territorial development. That early conceptualisation was published as a book (Karlsen and Larrea 2014) and later used to gather more researchers around the development of a new environment. The book was an important turning point that helped to keep the community together.

3. Action research was integrated as part of Orkestra's mission and strategic plans.

Although the first initiative to start doing action research in Orkestra was followed by very few researchers, this perspective entered the dialogue processes in the direction group and the administration board of the institute, where the mission and strategic plans were continuously revised. However, action research was felt to be too radical, and few researchers identified with it. Consequently, the objective for all researchers was worded as doing transformative research, with action research considered as one way to accomplish this. That reduced tensions in the organisation.

4. The engagement of stakeholders, i.e., the policymakers in local and regional governments, was fundamental for consolidating the environment.

One of the features of ARTD is that teams of policymakers and action researchers closely collaborate, engaging in a policy process for policymakers and, simultaneously, action research for researchers. These relationships have been spaces for learning and negotiation, with the critical nature of action research also creating tensions. At times, the emergent nature of the process made it difficult for researchers to communicate the process, or participation challenged hierarchical structures. Nonetheless, the policymakers collaborating with action researchers have consistently supported them by funding long-term processes where ARTD has developed and also by explaining the value of action research in the territory.

5. International alliances have been key in all stages of the process.

These alliances have materialised through formal agreements with other research organisations as well as through collaboration in academic production. The most evident alliances took place early in the development of ARTD, with the University of Agder and the National Technological University in Rafaela. To complement the formal agreements between these organisations, James Karlsen and Pablo Costamagna became associate researchers at Orkestra.

6. There is a strong emotional connection that keeps the environment together.

From a rational point of view, the members of the environment share a methodology (ARTD), but what keeps them together is also emotional and has to do with affection, mutual support, and safe spaces, as shown by the mutual inquiry process. The sense of identity and belonging is also strong.

7. A core challenge for sustaining the environment is the generational relay.

An explicit effort has been made to ensure the environment is a collective endeavour that does not depend on the initial entrepreneurs or any other specific person. A new generation is already on board, while the initial participants are still active. Two main challenges have been brought to light regarding this. The first relates to whether the young generation will reinvent ARTD to serve as a suitable path towards their aims and goals. The second

relates to how to develop the best possible connection between the ideas and initiatives of the young generation and those with long-term experience.

8. One of the unique features of this environment is its multiculturality.

The early alliances established to develop ARTD have resulted in a multicultural environment with a growing awareness that trust among participants opens the possibility of a constructive dialogue between perspectives of the Global South and North.

Closing Reflections

The previous features are, of course, dynamic, and the lessons learnt will evolve in the following years. The main conclusion from this discussion is that action research environments are a relevant dimension for gaining insight into why action research emerges and grows in some places and not in others, or why it weakens in a given context after having been strong. Although each environment will have its own specificities, this article invites us to reflect on the role played in each case by methodological and organisational entrepreneurship, the engagement of stakeholders, international alliances, emotions, intergenerational connections, and multiculturality.

Researchers who have tried to develop an action research environment will most likely recognise themselves in our experience of the situation. At the same time, we are aware that individuals, the external environment, culture, and many coincidences help us shape our own unique path. We still hope that our analysis of the situation will offer insights to others on what is needed to develop an action research environment and perhaps also on why it is difficult to succeed in establishing such an environment. Our action research history started in 2007, and our development is not over. New opportunities and challenges will arise, and our development circles will continue into new phases. This is just the beginning.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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