

Action Research in the Plural Crisis of the Living

Understanding, Envisioning, Practicing, Organising Eco-Social Transformation.

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Published in:
Educational Action Research

DOI:
[10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433)

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Egmose, J., Hauggaard-Nielsen, H., & Jacobsen, S. G. (2022). Action Research in the Plural Crisis of the Living: Understanding, Envisioning, Practicing, Organising Eco-Social Transformation. . *Educational Action Research*, 30(4), 671-683. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433>

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Educational Action Research

Connecting Research and Practice for Professionals and Communities

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/react0>

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To cite this article: Jonas Egmoose, Henrik Hauggaard-Nielsen & Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen (2022) Action research in the plural crisis of the living: understanding, envisioning, practicing, organising eco-social transformation, Educational Action Research, 30:4, 671-683, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2022.2084433>



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Published online: 13 Jun 2022.



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Action research in the plural crisis of the living: understanding, envisioning, practicing, organising eco-social transformation

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ABSTRACT

Finding ourselves in the midst of a plural eco-social crisis, this paper addresses roles and guiding questions for action research understanding, envisioning, practicing, and organising eco-social action, with the aim of renewing our human entanglements with the living ecologies, in which we are embedded. Driven by the aim of democratising eco-social transformations, climate- and biodiversity disasters are approached as symptoms of a plural eco-social crisis. From an eco-feminist position, this crisis concerns notions of mastery and extractivism eroding human and societal capabilities to sustain the inherent regenerative capacities of the living. Grounded in critical utopian action research, the paper addresses four different dimensions in action research for eco-social transformation: i) enabling social learning spaces to make visible the ways we are socially and ecologically related; ii) re-imagining how we want to live and relate in wider ecologies; iii) seeking alternatives to mastery through tangible practices; and iv) enabling new organisational forms for societal reorganisation. Building on concrete cases from urban planning to rural and regenerative practice, this paper describes how these different perspectives can mutually strengthen action research for eco-social transformation.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 31 August 2020
Accepted 8 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Eco-social transformation; critical utopian action research; plural crisis; eco-feminism; regenerative

Democratising eco-social transformation in the plural crisis

In all its diversity, action research has always had a strong commitment to enabling democratic social change (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2009). That human and ecological flourishing go hand in hand with this is imperative (Reason and Canney 2015). Hence, in times increasingly calling for eco-social transformation (Elsen 2018) the call for action research to engage in transformational processes addressing climate change and sustainability is clear (Bradbury et al. 2019). Responding to the eco-social crisis, however, not least implies identifying and considering methodological questions guiding action research towards societal transformations. Reflecting across concrete examples and cases, this paper elaborates on what eco-social transformation might mean in the context of participatory action research. Action research holds strong positions in democratising knowledge creation

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and enabling plural epistemologies, with the capacity to nurture rather than erode the living ecologies we are inherently part of (Kettleborough 2019). What we are facing in the realities of climate- and biodiversity crisis (IPBES 2019) is not only the destruction of human and ecological livelihoods but also the erosion of our human sense and societal organisation responsive to being embedded in these (Negt 1984). In eco-feminist thinking (Plumwood 1993), this challenge essentially concerns our very sense of responsibility, carefulness, and attentiveness towards the living. This paper methodologically considers key roles and guiding questions for action research in critically understanding, envisioning, practicing, and organising ourselves embedded in eco-social relations responding to contemporary states of crisis.

To understand the interrelated nature of the crises we are facing – the climate-, biodiversity-, economic-, social-, democratic-, and epistemological crises – these can rightly be understood as *symptoms* of a deeper plural crisis, taking roots in our human entanglements with the world: the multiple ways we are related and relate ourselves in and as part of living ecologies. Thus, the plural crisis does not merely concern an outer environment (Sachs 2010). As recently suggested (Egmoose et al. 2021), it is a crisis in relations between humans and their wider ecologies: in human, social, and ecological relations constituting those living livelihoods we are inherently part of; the way we understand and conceptualise these relations; and in the way we organise ourselves embedded in these. Thus, the eco-social crisis requires a rethinking of eco-social relations. While the crisis, for some, has not been very visible, for others, it has become omnipresent since its consequences are externalised and unequally redistributed at global scales. The historical absence of understanding that everything is interrelated has powered this crisis. More than anything, the plural crisis calls for cultural renewal in understanding how we are related, attentiveness towards the ecologies in which we are embedded, and reciprocal relations between humans and nature.

Changing the master story. An ecofeminist perspective

The reason that the plural crisis is a *crisis* is because it concerns our very way of understanding our being in the world. In her major work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1993) made the analysis clear: What leads to crisis is the aspiration of mastery of nature. In its various forms – from the ways we understand human–nature relations; the way land is cultivated; the framing of scientific concepts – notions of mastery can be found as a particular way of engaging with the world, in which the reciprocity of being related is replaced by taking mastery over something. Aspired to free humans by taking mastery over nature, sciences have historically developed into increasingly specialised disciplines, providing the possibility for steering, controlling, and manipulating physical processes. This has been the case even in modern environmentalism, through the combination of scientific reductionism, gaining analytic capacity by reducing living life into models and systemic thinking aiming to re-establish what was lost through the analytical process: the emergent capacities of the living. This implies an epistemological crisis in science itself since the impressive increase in ever more specialised disciplines monitoring the catastrophes while they happen does not alter the very dynamics of human–nature interrelations. As noted by Plumwood:

If rationality has to have any function for long-term survival it must ... find a form which encourages sensitivity to the conditions under which we exist on the earth, one which recognises and accommodates the denied relationships of dependencies and enables us to acknowledge our debt to sustaining others of the earth. This implies creating a democratic culture beyond dualism, ending colonising relationships and finding a mutual ethical basis for enriching coexistence with earth others (Plumwood 1993, 196).

To do so, we need to 'learn to recognise and eject the master identity in culture, in ourselves, and in political and economic structures' (Plumwood 1993, 194). The challenge is not to find renewed strategies for mastery in a post-apocalyptic world. The task is to find ways in which we can actually practice living by making other worlds possible for the living to sustain (Gibson-Graham, Camaron, and Healy 2013 Roelvink, Martin, and Gibson-Graham 2015). This implies not only finding new languages but essentially to enable, reinvent, and learn from real practices demonstrating that other relations *are possible in practice*. The horizon of ecological thinking implies an increased attention towards the way everything is connected through multiple entanglements and hence renewed questions on human responsibility. As humans, we are not only in the world but always also in relation with the world, hence our human freedom and responsibility. Such a relationship, however, does not per se mean mastery. What human qualities characterise such responsibility, carefulness, and attentiveness? How can we translate such qualities across multiple practices, knowledge, and contexts grasping entanglements of the living (Egmoose et al. 2021)?

From extractivist to regenerative practices

Understanding the root causes of the plural crisis is paramount. Essentially, mastery of nature has paved the way to exploiting the Earth's living ecologies. As argued by Fraser and Jaeggi (2018) human exploitation of natural resources can be seen as advanced extractivism, by which monetary growth implies extracting value out of ecologies, which are treated as merely resources for human exploitation. In this perspective, erosion of social and ecological livelihoods are consequences of an extractivist approach. This implies that the inherent capabilities of Earth's living ecologies to renew and sustain themselves is neither recognised nor valued. A very concrete example of this is the way we cultivate lands. In industrialised agriculture and food-production technological development, mechanisation, fertiliser, and pesticide use have seemingly accelerated productivity. At the same time, organic soil matter has been reduced at tremendous speed (Rockström et al. 2009). It is therefore of particular interest to learn from and reinvent human practices towards regeneration of nature, ecosystems, and communities (Rhodes 2017). What is needed is not only to mitigate the consequences of contemporary production and consumption. Basically, we need to rethink relations between humans and nature, and how they are carried out in practice. In opposition to approaches giving priority to optimised technologies, we can do so by learning from domains where human entanglements with ecologies *as living* still persist. For centuries, traditional farmers have managed diverse, self-sufficient and self-regulating locally adapted agriculture with practices that often result in both community food security and the conservation of agrobiodiversity (Altieri 2004). In practices of regenerative agriculture, currently emerging on the margins of industrialised agriculture, nurturing ecological capabilities to regenerate is the point of departure (LaCanne and Lundgren 2018). As argued by Santos (2008), western development has

actively marginalised and invisibilised entire ways of knowing and acting. This is the case not least in terms of how many farmers have an exclusive focus on productivity for global value chains and limited attention to the ecological multi-functionality of living soils (Schröder et al. 2020). Accordingly, we may ask what has become invisibilised through historical processes of modern development, and where regenerative practices can be found and revitalised? In the following, this is done by drawing upon the experience from a number of different action research projects, which might seem disconnected, but are in fact connected through a common theme: the ambivalence between extractivist and regenerative approaches. The idea of doing so is to understand this tension across the urban–rural divide from structural urban dynamics and modern urban living to agro-ecological understandings of the way we cultivate lands. In other words, to start tracing potential re-emergences of our attention and carefulness towards the living across multiple contexts.

Action research transforming eco-social relations

Changing ways of knowing, practicing, and organising eco-social relations is not easy. Nor is enabling transformation not onto, but driven by, people. Action research holds strong traditions for working together with people, democratising processes of knowledge creation and social change. Essentially action research is ‘a co-creation of knowing with, not on or about, people’ (Bradbury 2015, 2). This is the reason for looking into how action research can further eco-social transitions. In doing so, we will be drawing on experiences from the participatory action research (PAR) methodology of critical utopian action research (CUAR) (Egmoose, Gleerup, and Nielsen 2020; Egmoose 2015; Nielsen and Nielsen 2015, 2006; Tofteng and Husted 2014). This way of working is embedded in the family of emancipation-oriented research traditions originating from German Critical Theory in the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Horkheimer 1947). It is committed to the initial democratic impulses of Kurt Lewin (1946) and Paulo Freire (1970) and inspired by Robert Jungk (Jungk and Mullert 1987) inventing the Future Creation Workshop (FCW) as a concrete method to work with critique, utopia, and action for change. The ambition of this practice is to bridge critical and visionary thinking across everyday life and expert knowledge as a way to create knowledge and enable social change. Eco-social transformations are increasingly driven by people, individuals, and communities, striving to find other ways of *practicing* human–nature relations. Hence, engaging in eco-social transformation implies a turn towards exemplary practices. We say this, not to underemphasise the value of action research methodologies but to pay particular attention to the question of working *with* people who are actively experimenting with new (or old) forms of eco-social relations. It is in this particular context that we want to draw attention to what we see as four different dimensions of action research: making invisibilised relations visible; enabling learning spaces for social imagination; changing relations through tangible practices; and organising for societal transformation. The intention is not to make a one-size-fits-all, or a process-guide for action research, but to pay attention to what we see as four different aspects of eco-social transformation, which are all needed for change to address the plural crisis.

Making eco-social relations visible: how are we related?

To understand eco-social relations, a first challenge is to make visible our plural human entanglement with our wider ecologies. This is the case in human, cultural, organisational, institutional, biological, and economic terms. How *are* we related, anyway? To start making such relations visible and exploring how they might be problematic, the notion of *free spaces* (Bladt and Nielsen 2013) is particularly valuable. Often relations are perceived simply as the way things *are*. Both at subjective, organisational and structural levels it can be difficult to question *what is*. The idea of enabling free spaces is to foster social arenas in everyday life where social structures of reality-power constricting people from thinking and speaking freely are reduced. Although not claimed to be power-free, action researchers can strive to facilitate social arenas where dominant external power structures are relieved in order to enable peoples' perspectives to be articulated more freely. The social and epistemological quality of establishing free spaces is that what is normally being suppressed or marginalised by contemporary societal power structures can potentially be articulated and shared. In other words, what appears as problematic becomes visible when providing free spaces for critique (Egmoose 2015). Providing free spaces can be done in many ways. In some cases, these are established by people and communities themselves, in others, action researchers can have a particular role as a third party enabling these. The Future Creation Workshop (FCW) is a particular methodology to do this (for an introduction see, e.g., Egmoose, Glerup, and Nielsen 2020; Nielsen and Nielsen 2006): participants are invited to a workshop (typically 1–2 days) to discuss a theme of common concern. The workshop is facilitated as a social learning space, with everyone sitting around a large paper on the wall, which serves as a collective

Box 1: Being busy just trying to survive. Downsides of modern urban living

To better understand how eco-social relations are challenged in modern living let us draw on the experiences from a London-based project aiming to provide deprived urban local communities with a say in the future of urban sustainability research (A full record of the project can be found in Eames and Egmoose 2011; Eames et al. 2009; Egmoose 2015). The project aimed to provide local residents with the opportunity to articulate problems and aspirations of urban living and invite planners and researchers to listen and respond to these particular challenges. To initiate this dialogue, local residents over a period of 3 months engaged in community dialogues about what it was like to live in their local area and, in collaboration with community film-workers, developed their own narratives and produced their own films, providing a strong voice on local issues and concerns. Challenges of youth crime, lack of community cohesion, and cultural and spatial gentrification were very real. As noted by one of the women involved, 'I think it's living in a city, it's a challenge'. 'We have got caught up in this big cycle of living to work, and being caught up in this kind of hamster-wheel of having to do all this stuff just in order to survive. And we don't have time to socialise, to be in the area, to do nice things, so we're busy just trying to survive' (Egmoose 2015, 66). Reflecting upon the experiences of working together with these people accentuates the inherent challenge of social sustenance: the difficulty of making a living: economically, socially, ecologically. A particular theme brought up was the dependency on industrialised food-production and consumption systems associated with the 'Tesco-poly'¹ monopolising retail spaces in the city. As noted by the residents: 'A lot of people are against this. These shops are conveniently placed near council housing, but the produce is considerably more expensive than the local independent grocers or the larger supermarkets. They sell a lot of junk food and pre-prepared and heavily packaged foods which create so much waste' (Egmoose 2015, 67). In this way, challenges of urban living reflected extractivism in a dual sense: Both as environmental extraction through urban consumerism and in terms of coping with the social consequences of extractivist economies impoverishing deprived urban neighbourhoods.

mind-map where all comments and inputs are noted and shared as the basis for participants themselves to identify and formulate emerging themes. By using simple but strict ground rules (we are only thinking critically; only use keywords; no discussion), norms not to be critical are temporarily put on hold, establishing a more equal social learning space where critique is centre stage. Essentially enabling free spaces *calls* for expressing invisibilised critiques: when free spaces are provided, people tend to start sharing what appears problematic and important to them concerning the issues at stake. Working with marginalised communities or people experiencing the consequences of problematic relations, the idea is that these can become articulated and made visible (See Box 1).

When listening to the lived experience of deprived urban communities, it is not difficult to start questioning existing eco-social relations: people and communities themselves can play an important part in tracing and make their own analyses of what appears problematic. Such critique not only is an important starting point for understanding problems as seen by the people and communities facing them, they also inherently imply aspiration for what could be different, and hence important motivations for change. Because everyday life experiences are embedded in historical societal settings, subjective experiences hold the potential for understanding not only individualised but also collective problems. In this way, addressing problems communities are facing can enable social learning processes to take place across individual and collective experiences and analyses of societal problems at stake. The key principle in this way of working is to facilitate people themselves in making their own experience-based analysis of existing problems. In this way, the methodology offers very concrete ways in which people and communities can start tracing and critically analysing what qualities characterise eco-social relations. In this way, analyses of what nurtures and erodes social and ecological livelihoods can be very concretely grounded in lived experience. The value of this way of working is both to make marginalised problems visible, but also to get a deeper understanding of the problems and interdependencies at stake. Whilst such critical awareness can be an important aspiration for change, it rarely directs future action alone. To do so, strengthening visionary thinking and social imagination seems often needed.

Enabling social imagination: how do we want to live and relate?

A particular part of CUAR is to respond to current problems by envisioning desired futures. Utopian thinking means imagining things that *could* be, not as an escape from reality, but to open up horizons and guide future action. Exactly by imagining how we would like things to be, it becomes clear, what might need to change. With the FCW methodology, this is done in concrete ways by facilitating workshops as free spaces for utopian thinking (again using simple ground rules: we are *strictly* utopian; only use keywords; no discussion). The idea of this way of working is to enable social imagination by creating strong visions and narratives that can guide future action. While working with the common theme at stake, the guiding question '*How do we want to live?*' indicates the utopian horizon for the work. The idea of doing so is to enable a social learning space for how we might want to live and relate differently (See Box 2).

The strength of envisioning utopian futures is that they might allow us more freely to imagine *how we want to live*, and not least, how we want to organise ourselves and the ways we are related. Social imagination implies rethinking how

Box 2: What a wonderful world it would be. Envisioning sustainable urban futures

Responding to the challenges addressed in the above case story, part of the action research process was for community members through future visioning exercises to envision how they would like to see the future. In this way, rather than building on expert-driven forecasts, the process was grounded in participants' own aspirations as well as initiatives in the local neighbourhood. In the area, some of the women involved were organising gardening and food-growing activities in the social housing estate. The community activities were meaningful in a plural sense both as social activities and providing vegetables for the household. What additionally became visible through the action research process was how these activities were not only meaningful in terms of everyday-life but also responding to broader societal challenges. To community members, food-growing stands as an alternative with strong implications for social sustenance and sustainability in both social and ecological terms. Envisioning alternatives through the action research process, residents worked around the idea of replacing car parks to make space for local allotments for community members to be able to sustain themselves. In these ways, local community activities were related to questions of urban planning, food production, food distribution, and consumption. Concrete ideas and initiatives of urban gardening, however, persisted somewhat detached from actual possibilities to change eco-social relations at scale. In this way, while community members were taking part in creating narratives for sustainable futures, actual possibilities to act remained needed.

we might live in different ways and how eco-social relations could be different. At the same time, it is often difficult just to imagine such altered relations without actually practicing them. This is why we suggest a renewed attention to learning from doing practical experimentation. *If* we want to substantially rethink eco-social relations, we need to identify and learn from particular practices inherently having the potential of transcending notions of mastery and enabling greater reciprocity in human–nature relations. In other words, if the plural crisis is a crisis in approaching *the living*, we need to learn from practical experiences with sustaining living ecologies. This is why we suggest learning from agroecological and regenerative practices, which might inspire how we want to live and organise ourselves.

Learning through practicing: how do tangible practices change our relations?

According to sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Western science has not only provided the foundation for industrialised practices but equally served as the knowledge base of global colonisation (Santos 2008) deeming certain types of knowledge, practice, and production irrelevant. The notion of epistemicide implies that entire ways of knowing and relating have become invisibilised in modern societies. In other words, ways of knowing and ways of acting are deeply interrelated. Thus, changing our perceptions of eco-social relations equally implies changing practices. Following this analysis, it becomes increasingly important to seek and nurture exemplary ecological practices that might be societally marginalised but can be found as latent practices that can in fact re-emerge. Experimental actions are of much interest since they inherently embed aspirations and search for alterations in the ways in which we relate with the world. Further, rather than just conceptualising what might be, concrete actions provide the possibility of testing what might also be doable. Hence, working with eco-social transformation identifying and experimenting with human practices that might actually hold the potential to alter eco-social relations is of particular importance. This aspect of eco-social transition draws particular attention to the importance of learning from and with human practice and *experience* (See Box 3).

Box 3: Rediscovering living soil. Experiments with regenerative agriculture

To illustrate tangible transformations in eco-social relations, we want to change from the urban to the rural setting, drawing on the experiences of working with farmers in transition between industrialised farming and agroecology (for this case, we are referring to the works by Hansen et al., 2020). In this project, we followed a group of conventional Danish farmers who for practical and economic reasons had an interest in leaving the plough behind, following conservation agriculture principles with direct seeding, soil cover, and diversified rotations. The basic idea of this practice is that it is possible to save workforce and money for equipment, by depending more on biological processes in the living soil. As a consequence, the farmers had to start relearning ancient soil-fertility-building practice. This both implied taking personal economic risks, compared to common practices, and feeling socially marginalised among other fellow farmers. Compared to current standards of having cleaned ploughed dark fields before seeding, non-ploughed soils look 'messy', in the eyes of the dominant conventional farmer paradigm, giving up control. Meeting the need for collective support and experimental exchange of experience, the basic idea in the project was to set up a farmers' 'experience exchange group' where farmers met at least four times every year across the growing season to exchange knowledge and experience as a way collectively to motivate and strengthen the development of new practices. FCW methods were applied to this way of working with particular attention to allow farmers to share their practices, visit their soils, exchange what worked and what did not, and engage in dialogue with agroecological researchers. In this way, the experience exchange group both had an important social function and served as a forum for peer-to-peer development of renewed practices. One of the interesting findings following the farmers in their transition was that the change happening was not only a change of practice but also a change in mindset: In industrialised farming, productivity is sought to be optimised and controlled not least by use of fertilisers, pesticides, and technological equipment. By abandoning the plough, farmers' attention started to shift from how they could manage crops above ground, towards being dependent on the biological processes below ground, in the living soil. Thus, altering practice not least implied changing mindset in the entire understanding of the role of the farmer and the interdependency with nature. In this way, practical experiments with what is doable can be seen as very concrete ways in which practitioners try to change things through their practice.

Altering eco-social relations not least requires the will and opportunity to experiment and create new (or old) types of experience through practice, that is, finding other ways that are doable. A particular action research role in this type of working is to work with practitioners, nurturing and widening their free space for experimentation not to be pre-determined by contemporary hegemonies. Experience exchange groups serve the dual purpose of supporting and critically engaging with practical development. Working with practitioners concerned with living soil is exemplary in this context since transitions from mastery and extractivism towards regenerative practices in agroecology become very concrete. On the other hand, however, such practices are often societally marginalised, which means that inventing practices is only part of the answer.

Societal transformation: how to organise for eco-social transformations?

While a turn to practice is an important first step for the re-emergence of invisibilised knowledges and practices, altered socio-ecological relations still suffer from being societally, culturally, institutionally, and economically marginalised. Thus, eco-social transformation not least implies finding ways to organise such initiatives in ways that can actually support and sustain them. Whilst societal change often relates to developments of national and international governance, action research has a particular role to play in working with marginalised practices in identifying needs for change, which can inform broader transformations. Hence, much can be learned from people who actively experiment with new ways of organising themselves (See Box 4).

Box 4: Enabling regenerative practices. Experiments with cooperative forms of organisation

In the context of eco-social crisis and the difficulties of changing eco-social relations, new types of organisational initiatives are emerging, spanning from eco-villages and regenerative agroecological practices to cooperative forms of food production and distribution. As recently argued (Egmoose et al. 2021), such initiatives seem to represent a regenerative turn with greater attention towards sustaining the living ecologies in which we are embedded. A particular aspect of such initiatives is that they are not only challenging contemporary practices but also experimenting with the organisational models enabling their activities. Working with cooperative forms of organisation is a particular way of enabling active co-ownership as opposed to extractivist thinking. Here, we want to draw on three concrete Danish examples to highlight different types of initiatives that seem to challenge extractivist logics: 'Regenerativt Jordbrug' (Regenerative Agriculture) is a regenerative agriculture network exchanging knowledge and skills for practicing regenerative agriculture to restore, rebuild, and improve soil health. The network gathers people who see the need to work beyond existing practice- and knowledge frameworks in the field. Whilst the network does not formally have a strong organisational position in the agricultural field, it gathers practitioners with a strong aspiration to experiment with regenerative principles. 'Andelsgårde' (Farm cooperative) is a cooperative investing membership payments from citizens into buying back farmland to establish sustainable agriculture. Acknowledging the impact of economic debt among farmers as decisive for changing practices, the initiative seeks to provide citizens with a direct impact on the cultivation of land, enabling more sustainable practices. By buying land, the cooperative enables small-scale farmers to apply and develop organic farming practices. 'Danmarks Økologiske Fødevarerfællesskaber' (Danish Food Cooperation) is a network of organic food cooperatives establishing local food systems for fair-priced organic vegetables through a working cooperative, and with very direct links between producers and consumers. The network has invented organisational models, for establishing local self-organising cooperatives in new places. In this way, the network has succeeded in growing, driven by local citizens starting new cooperatives across the country. Without postulating that these initiatives deliver conclusive answers to the eco-social crisis, they must be seen as examples of important initiatives needed to experiment with tangible ways in which regenerative practices can be organised across the urban and the rural, building on cooperative models of organisation and with a regenerative approach to agriculture.

While cooperative forms of organisation do not per se renew eco-social relations, they are particularly interesting as democratic initiatives transcending extractivist logics. The notion of 'ending colonising relationships' (Plumwood 1993, 196) in this sense not least implies a renewed attention towards marginalised practices and plural epistemologies leading towards cooperative forms of organisation and building on economic thinking beyond extractivism (Banerjee, Carney, and Hulgard 2021; Banerjee, Lucas dos Santos, and Hulgård 2021; Eynaud et al. 2019). Whilst a particular role of action research is to nurture such practices, this also implies a societal dimension in terms of how research insights might help scaling and strengthening frameworks for action. This has major consequences for collaborations between researchers and civil society and raises the challenge of working towards shared notions of transformative practices and aims. In this way, working with practitioners to challenge contemporary approaches to the plural crisis can imply particular transformative impulses to challenge and change organisational, institutional, and regulative frameworks while operating locally.

Four dimensions of eco-social transformation

What we have tried to illustrate with this paper is that responding to the eco-social crisis requires renewed approaches to eco-social relations. This implies not only being able to work across various, often disconnected contexts, from the urban to the rural, but also

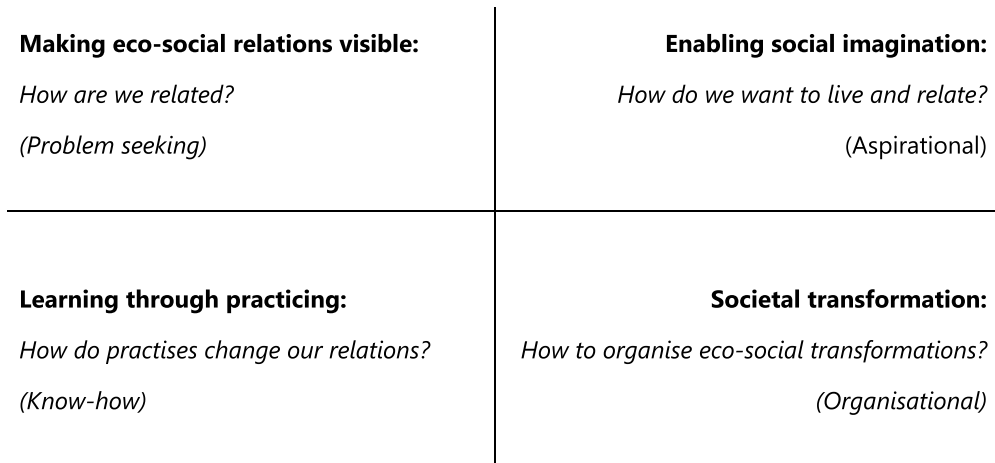


Figure 1. Four dimensions of action research in eco-social transformations.

to work beyond conceptual logics of mastery and extraction in theory and practice. Grounded in the methodology of critical utopian action research, we have sought to address how eco-feminist thinking in the context of eco-social crisis calls for renewed focus towards human responsibility, carefulness, and attentiveness towards the living, and further how this particular perspective might urge new sets of questions to be addressed in action research. In particular, we have sought to illustrate that a renewal of eco-social relations is needed, and that action research can play a profound role in doing so, grounded in peoples' lived experience and tangible experiments. What can be learned across experiences from such seemingly disconnected projects? At least, that changing eco-social relations cannot be done in just one location, project, or context. Action research initiatives attempting to do so might initiate smaller changes but easily fail to deliver long-term transformational processes since these are more than anything questions of bringing people into relationship with one another across social and geographical scales. A particular challenge for action research therefore is the difficulties of navigating methodologically in transformations since no single method will be doing the job alone. Rather, it seems necessary to have a more holistic approach across a number of different aspects that are all needed to change eco-social relations. Therefore, we would like to propose four dimensions to take into account enabling eco-social transformation (Figure 1).

Altering eco-social relations requires that we are able to reconfigure our human entanglements with our wider ecologies in multiple ways at the same time. First, we need critically to reconsider our social and ecological relations. This is the problem seeking part of action research. A guiding question can be to consider and reconsider how we are actually related. Providing people with a free space to criticise problematic relations can serve as an important starting point for tracing, analysing and questioning such relations and their consequences. Secondly, we need to address our human aspirations for how we want to live and relate while understanding the consequences of the ways in which we are organising ourselves. This is where social imagination is needed: to be able to imagine futures preferred to the

present. This is the aspirational part of the work, motivating transformational change. Thirdly, we need to (re-)identify and (re-)develop tangible practices that do not reproduce the very same problems that we try to overcome. This is the experimental part of the work, where experience with practice provides the know-how and learning of what might be doable and possible. Fourth, we need to find ways of organising ourselves in ways that actually nurture and sustain such eco-social practices with greater attentiveness toward the living ecologies in which we are embedded. This implies finding new organisational, institutional, and societal forms enabling eco-social transformation. If eco-social transformations are to be democratic, these questions must be addressed openly as guiding questions that people as citizens, in their workplaces, as officials, or whatever role they might have, can start working with. What we suggest is not a four-step model or work-plan, but four different dimensions that need to be taken into account in enabling eco-social transformations.

Action research and the living

What we have sought to elaborate in this paper is how appropriate responses to the plural crisis demand substantially to rethink and re-enact human–nature relations. As the consequences of crisis unfold, it becomes still clearer how we as humans both have the potential to nurture and completely erode the living ecologies in which we are embedded (Egmoose 2015). From an eco-feminist perspective, eco-social transformation implies finding tangible ways to enact increased attention, responsibility, and carefulness for the regenerative capacities of the living. What we suggest is that much is still to be learned from those practices concerned with living life (like regenerative agroecological practices) which can inspire new approaches in other settings (like rethinking urban life). Doing so both implies working across multiple practices and collective efforts, and to link seemingly disconnected fields and initiatives by sharing plural horizons. Taking into account the way in which eco-social transitions around the world are increasingly led by practitioners experimenting with new (and re-emergences of old) ways of doing so, action research seems to have a renewed role in nurturing transformational processes. By this contribution, we hope to situate the tradition of CUAR (Hansen, Nielsen, and Nadarajah 2016; Gunnarson, Hansen, and Nielsen 2015) in the broader family of action research, striving to enable eco-social transformation, and to move beyond the logics of mastery, by working with people addressing plural questions and multiple answers to the challenges we are facing.

Note

1. Tescopoly is a play on the name of a major UK supermarket chain, Tesco, and refers to the way Tesco and other large supermarkets are dominating consumer markets.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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