

# **Editorial**

## **Interaction between research and practice**

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(guest editors)

As guest editors we want to thank the authors for their contribution to this special issue about the interaction between research and practice. We also want to thank the journal for giving us the opportunity to be guest editors. An interesting and challenging process has come to an end. Now it is our hope that the articles will connect to the general discourse about research and practice. Interaction between research and practice is a very general topic, but more than ever it is at the core of social science, given the challenges many territories face, such as economic crisis, social change, unemployment and the need for new, innovative policies.

For action research, interaction between research and practice has a double challenge; on the one hand researchers are participating with actors in change processes and on the other hand they are creating theoretical knowledge. All the authors of articles in this issue have struggled with this challenge and they have solved it in different ways. The articles show that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to interaction between research and practice. The practical performance of an action research process is a complex issue that covers all the challenges a research process normally faces, and different research process designs also create different challenges. Our aim is not to discuss this complexity, but to let the articles in the issue speak for themselves. The articles reflect the pluralism of action research, which we define as the possibility of different interpretations of the same phenomenon, respect for other theoretical approaches, methodolo-

gies and practical performance of the research process (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014; Pålshaugen, 2013).

This issue is connected to the double challenge of action research and in order to address it we wanted to invite practitioners (in this case policy makers) to work with us on the articles. Not as co-authors, but to test out the main message in the articles and see whether the theoretical arguments were useful in an on-going action research project. This was an experiment we had conducted in an ongoing long term action research project called Gipuzkoa Sarean (GS) in the province of Gipuzkoa in the Basque Country, where trust between researchers and practitioners has been built over years of interaction. The first step was taken when Orkestra, Basque Institute of Competitiveness hosted the Regional Innovation Policy conference in October 2013. As we were responsible for one of the tracks in the conference we invited action researchers to contribute with their papers and policy makers we were working with in GS to discuss their territorial development challenges.

Some of the articles in this issue were later discussed with those policy makers and other members of their government. It would take too long to present the concrete results of these discussions in this editorial but a headline summary is provided in our introduction to each of the articles below.

We begin with an article by *Karlsen and Larrea*, which focuses on GS. The case is about a policy learning process over six years. It offers a good framework for reflection on how action research can contribute to changes in policy. Paulo Freire has inspired Karlsen and Larrea in their *praxis* with policy makers. A thick description documents the process. The main conclusion is that social learning can happen when researchers and policy makers make their ideological positions and theoretical assumptions explicit and continuously construct and reconstruct them from practice.

In the second article, *Sobotka and Streck* address the contribution of action research to participatory budgeting. Based on 20 years' experience in Brazil, the article focuses on the tension between two different meanings of participation understood by the different actors, that of participation as a democratic principle and participation as a strategy. This experience was

directly discussed among policy makers and researchers in the project in Gipuzkoa as a way to think critically about the project and inspired a decision to further coordinate different departments within the government.

The next contribution, by *Vasstrøm and Normann*, is also based on a case, a three-year (2009-2012) Interreg project called: *Rural development in Scandinavia* (LISA-KASK). The authors assume research, practice and policy to represent different but interconnected social spheres, each with different interests, institutional rationalities and values. Based on this they discuss how roles in R&D-projects can transform and develop throughout the duration of a project and how different types of knowledge reciprocate with policy learning at different scales.

*Pålshaugen* develops the argument that interactive research will provide new knowledge of how to realise context-sensitive innovation policies, by supporting interactive learning for the purpose of realising the innovation potential of regions. The discussion of his ideas after the RIP 2013 Conference inspired a shared interpretation of policy makers and researchers in GS: that researchers are territorial actors with an ideological position in the project. The ideological positions of policy makers materialise in their policy decisions and those of researchers in the methodological approach used.

The article by *Johnsen, Knudsen and Normann* discusses action research strategies in regional development and conceptualises the “third place” as complex regional settings. Their discussion of two action research approaches:- socio-technical approach and the democratic dialogue approach - was directly used in the GS project, to gain awareness that different epistemological approaches used by the groups in the project had led to different types of results in terms of learning. At the time of discussing this article, these differences were making it difficult for two of the groups to work together on the project.

Finally, *Ennals* sets out an experience-based account of “Learning from Differences”, which underpins a discussion of engaged research as an alternative to conventional detached social science. The author makes an effort to clarify and make explicit the tacit knowing developed throughout many years of practice. He does so with the objective of assisting new

researchers, managers and policy makers who are joining action research. His concept inspired the integration of the experience of researchers from Argentina, Norway, the Basque Country and other parts of Spain in GS.

## References

- Karlsen, J., & Larrea, M. (2014). *Territorial development and Action Research: Innovation through dialogue*. Farnham Gower.
- Pålshaugen, Ø. (2013). Meta-theory and practice: A plea for pluralism in innovation studies. In Johnsen, H.C.G. & Pålshaugen, P. (eds.), *Hva er innovasjon? Perspektiver i norsk innovasjonsforskning* (pp. 286-306). Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.