

Strengthening the social fabric: Action research for commoning, solidarity, mutual learning and sustainable change

By Lone Hersted

Book review concerning *A Call to Action Research: Confronting the social and environmental sustainability crises* written by Davydd J. Greenwood (Cornell University), Johan E. Ravn (SINTEF and Nord University) and Koen P.R. Bartels (University of Birmingham). Published by Edward Elgar in December 2025.

Introduction

Recently I've had the pleasure of reading the book *A Call to Action Research: Confronting the Social and Environmental Sustainability Crises* written by Davydd Greenwood, Johan Ravn and Koen Bartels. The book is directed toward a wide and diverse audience interested in action research and related collaborative approaches to the creation of social and environmental change – scholars, students, practitioners and citizens in general. The authors point out that being an action researcher is not just reserved for academic researchers working at the universities, stating that, “anyone, in a variety of institutional and social contexts can be an action researcher by integrating its principles and practices into their own ways of thinking, acting, and relating, and into the organizations, coalitions, and projects they are involved with” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 12). I consider this is a very important message because action research derives from, and should be anchored in, practice and broadened out to society in general.

The book entails 323 pages, consists of ten chapters and is divided in three overall parts:

Part I: What action research is and why do it now

Part II: How action research confronts sustainability crises

Part III: Where we go from here with action research

The book is dedicated to the renowned Norwegian sociologist, Morten Levin, who has inspired many action researchers around the world.

Fortaleciendo el tejido social: Investigación-acción para la comunidad, la solidaridad, el aprendizaje mutuo y el cambio sostenible

Reseña del libro „A Call to Action Research: Confronting the social and environmental sustainability crises“, escrito por Davydd J. Greenwood (Universidad de Cornell), Johan E. Ravn (SINTEF y Universidad Nord) y Koen P.R. Bartels (Universidad de Birmingham). Publicado por Edward Elgar en diciembre de 2025.

Introducción

Recientemente he tenido el placer de leer el libro „*A Call to Action Research: Confronting the Social and Environmental Sustainability Crises*“ de Davydd Greenwood, Johan Ravn y Koen Bartels. El libro está dirigido a un público amplio y diverso interesado en la investigación-acción y los enfoques colaborativos relacionados con la generación de cambio social y ambiental: académicos, estudiantes, profesionales y ciudadanos en general. Los autores señalan que ser investigador-acción no es exclusivo de los investigadores académicos que trabajan en universidades, afirmando que „cualquier persona, en diversos contextos institucionales y sociales, puede ser investigador-acción integrando sus principios y prácticas en su propia forma de pensar, actuar y relacionarse, así como en las organizaciones, coaliciones y proyectos en los que participa“ (Greenwood, Ravn y Bartels, 2025, p. 12). Considero que este es un mensaje muy importante, ya que la investigación-acción surge de la práctica y debe estar arraigada en ella, extendiéndose a la sociedad en general.

El libro consta de 323 páginas, diez capítulos y se divide en tres partes principales:

Parte I: Qué es la investigación-acción y por qué realizarla ahora

Parte II: Cómo la investigación-acción aborda las crisis de sostenibilidad

Parte III: ¿Qué sigue para la investigación-acción?

El libro está dedicado al renombrado sociólogo noruego Morten Levin, quien ha inspirado a muchos investigadores-acción en todo el mundo.

My first impression as a reader

The book is very comprehensive and ambitious. It contains a large series of interesting and relevant themes in relation to action research. It does not only describe action research as an approach or a theoretical concept but also covers important historical knowledge concerning the development of action research, industrial democracy and related collaborative practices. Furthermore, it redefines and situates action research in a contemporary historical, economic, political and planetary context. This book is not only about action research as a way of problem-solving, learning and developing knowledge, but it also provides the reader with examples about how we can create sustainable change in a larger perspective and organize alternatives to dominant unsustainable ways of living and organizing our society, commun-

ities, institutions and workplaces. It contains a critical analysis of capitalism and neoliberalism and their consequences for people, species and the planet as such and demonstrates alternative pathways for people to co-create more sustainable ways of living, working and organizing as response to wicked problems.

The book literally represents a “calling”. As the authors write in the preface: “With this book we issue a *call to action research* to mobilize people to confront our social and ecological sustainability crises together and pursue a sustainable, just, and democratic world” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. xii.). Furthermore, it points out and discusses important ethical guidelines in relation to action research and provides the reader with a series of inspiring examples from practice; e.g. La Rosca network working with action research in the rural parts of Colombia, the Highlander School in Tennessee, Southern United States, worker-owned industrial cooperatives in Mondragon in the Basque Country in Spain and also action research initiatives in manufacturing industry in Norway.

The overall ambition of the book

A Call to Action Research is written in a context and time marked by severe environmental challenges, rapid societal changes, turbulence, political and geopolitical tensions, wars and crisis of democracy. It situates action research within this volatile eco-social, planetary context. By taking point of departure in a world characterized by a series of crises (environmental, financial, democratic, social, political etc.), this book reflects a strong societal and environmental engagement and a strong concern for the creation of societal change. Referring to Chinese-American anthropologist, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Tsing 2015), the authors argue that we’re “living in the ruins of a social, political, economic, and ecological system that we humans ourselves have undermined” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 2), and they propose action research, not just as an academic approach to research, but as an approach to a collaborative creation of change. This means a way of working on a collaborative basis towards new forms of organizing and living with a higher degree of sustainability, environmental responsibility, social justice, democracy, solidarity and respect for fundamental human rights.

The book addresses the complex sustainability crises, climate change denial, racism, exclusion of minorities, exploitation of the planet etc. and argues for the need for systemic change. In this regard, it argues for a showdown with more traditional “spectator research” and encourages the reader to take an active stance to create change. The authors are critical of neoliberalism which they define as the “unfettered spread of the free market capitalism across all areas of government and social life” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 4), and they also see the New Public Management (NPM) as “a key incarnation of neoliberalism, which has embedded principles and technologies of the market in welfare states.” (p. 4).

The authors refer to Bruno Latour (Latour 2016 p. 4) writing that “we feel lost in space, lost in time, and unable to stabilize the agency that is supposed to put all of us into action”. However, the book defies hopelessness and powerlessness by proposing action research as an approach to contribute to a wider movement for systemic change. Even though the book is critical concerning our society today, it also provides hope and reflects an ambition to create

sustainable change in our world. The authors point out that action research offers “a wealth of approaches to achieve change and join forces with others. Anyone can become an action researcher or benefit from engaging in it.” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. xii.). They also point out that action research “is not the only way forward. There are many other solidary actors and groups working towards these goals with whom we need to collaborate” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 169).

The authors explain that their purpose with this book is “to encourage newcomers, experienced action researchers, participatory activists, and curious skeptics to come together in a solidary movement based on recognition of the well-established and shared foundations of diverse action research approaches across global contexts.” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 20).

The authors’ understanding of action research

There are many different approaches to action research and, in this regard the authors point out, that there “is no one ‘right’ way to engage in action research and join the wider movement” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 13). The book explores many varieties of action research. As the authors state: “Action research is a large house with many rooms where people with different ideologies and from different communities and communities of practice can find space for themselves to act on their own behalf. Varieties of action research go under many different names and are not all limited to people who call themselves action researchers. It is a congeries of movements and practices aiming at global ecological and social stability and guided by a desire for fairness on a global scale” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 13). In this way, the book offers a very broad and open approach to action research while considering action research as “an everyday practice that anyone can and should engage in” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 22).

Theoretical foundation of the book

The book draws on pragmatism, critical theory, systems thinking, evolutionary theory, complexity theory and relational perspectives. The sources of theoretical inspiration are manifold. Among others can be mentioned American pragmatists such as William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, Mary Parker Follett and John Dewey but also French philosopher Bruno Latour, the French economist, Thomas Piketty, the Hungarian social theorist Karl Polanyi, the Brazilian pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire, the German-American social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, the Norwegian working life researcher Bjørn Gustavsen, the German scholar and activist, Silke Helfrich and her co-writer, American scholar and activist, David Bollier, the British community researchers Lisa Goodson and Jenny Phillimore just to mention a few.

In the following, I’ll highlight some of the themes in the book that captured my particular interest. Due to the limited scope of the paper, it’ll not be possible to lay out all the interesting

topics here, so I've chosen the themes which made the most impression on me as a reader, hoping that the readers will feel encouraged and motivated to read the book in its entirety themselves.

Relational ethics

Something that resonated with me as a reader was the understanding of ethics as a relational phenomenon. The authors underline elements such as personal responsibility, judgment, and relational awareness in context as important ethical principles in action research. They also warn against transforming action research into recipes that should be followed mechanically. Instead, we should pay more attention to the ways how we engage in and facilitate processes of dialogue, mutual learning and change. For instance, they argue that: "A key challenge for ethical action research is good facilitation of communication processes. Diverse participants understand both more than and less than what is actually said, depending on their social positions and experiences. Participants must learn to ask for clarification, listen to response, let ambiguities pass, and trust that they will find ways to clarify some things later when more has been said and in light of the developing shared understandings. Meeting these standards is a complex process that also involves relational ethics" (p. 55).

This also means that we need to be very careful and aware of how to take part in, and as well, facilitate these kinds of processes, which are most often characterized by multiple voices, multiple realities, non-linearity and unpredictability. We need to learn how we can become better at listening and navigating ambiguity, uncertainty and the unforeseen in dialogic process. In action research, there are no quick fixes or rapid answers, it's a matter of pathfinding in collaborative and often complex processes, which means that we need to be responsive and attentive to the process, the situation and the many voices involved.

The authors write that "Contrary to seeing it as universal, abstract, or context-independent, ethics is an integral part of the reflective and relational here-and-now practice of action research" (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 54). They explain that there are no absolute ethical recipes, and that, "often ethical principles come into conflict in real situations requiring difficult choices and prioritization of values. This does not mean that there are no ethical standards to apply, but that such standards must be worked out by the affected stakeholders taking responsibility for the impact of their actions and for the balance of ethical principles that they can agree to achieve" (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 54). The authors highlight a series of basic ethical standards that they consider serve as guidelines for action research in general, such as:

- "Respect for the individual, families, and communities, including those affected by massive global inequality and greed.
- Support for the principles of solidarity to allow no one other than sociopaths to be discounted or discarded.
- Respect for and inclusion of race-ethnic, gender, ideological and different knowledges, skills, and experiences.
- Respect for nature through the promotion of planetary ecological and political sustainability.

- Doing legitimate science in the context of application, in the context of action.” Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 10).

Related to these ethical guidelines is the statement from the authors that: “Action research is the practice of promoting solidarity to solve shared problems based on the commitment to the equal value of all people, and not just those with capital. It is the opposite of the instrumental treatment of people and nature as objects or commodities to be captured, controlled and exploited” (p. 186).

Restoring the social fabric through action research

Another theme that captured my particular interest while reading the book, is the use of the metaphor, “social fabric”. Inspired by the Austro-Hungarian researcher of economic history, Karl Polanyi and others, the authors often refer to the “social fabric”, a term rooted in an overall systemic understanding, referring to the complex web of relationships and systems in which our life unfolds, and which is needed for living peacefully together and addressing collective challenges. According to the authors, the “social fabric” means “the ability of people in communities to support and be aware of each other in solidary ways (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 161). They further explain that the social fabric “consists of the relationships, organizational structures, norms, values, and worldviews that link members of communities into interactive societies capable of surviving over time. Without the social fabric, human life is impossible, no matter what radical individualist economists and politicians say” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 166).

The “social fabric” can be seen as the social cohesion that holds a society together, and the authors argue for action research to promote solidarity to restore and strengthen the “social fabric”. They point out that “neoliberalism underpins and has exacerbated existing structures of inequality and environmental degradation while undermining democratic systems and the social fabric everywhere”. They argue for the need to mobilize action research to restore the social fabric and create “a collective movement for systemic change.” As a reader, I consider that this statement is gaining renewed actuality in a world characterized by disruption, turbulence, democratic crises, conflict and war, and that there is an urgent need for joint action and solidarity movement towards a more sustainable future for our global ecosystem.

Commoning

Related to the idea of the “social fabric” and action research is the idea of “commoning”. “Commoning” aims to create more equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities and societies by fostering cooperation over competition. It’s a practice where people engage in an active, social process of collaborating, collectively managing, producing, and sustaining shared resources such as land, knowledge, or digital tools. It involves peer governance, sustainable provisioning, and shared social practices, shifting from individual ownership to collaborative action. We find the idea of commoning in the cooperative movement or similar

forms of collective ways of organizing. This could be, for example, living together in “collectives”, the common cultivation of land, collaborative manufacturing in cooperatives or urban gardening. As the authors point out, commoning is “a practice of collaborating and sharing to meet every day needs and achieve a good, meaningful, and sustainable existence for people and local communities” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 71). The authors argue that, “today, in view of the sustainability crises, the commoning model is getting increased attention” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 71).

As living beings we’re deeply connected and related to each other. Living systems are entangled and are depending on each other. With reference to David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, (2019) the authors argue that we need to make an “Ontoshift” to a relational worldview. They propose action research as the commoning of socio-cultural and ecological problems, considering commoning as a direct response to the challenge of the present sustainability crises. They argue that “[...] all problems must be addressed by creating solidary, collaborative groups of problem- and solution-owners who are best situated to know their own life and work situations, and with professional experts who can assist them by facilitating action research processes” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 72).

Promoting solidarity

Related to action research, “commoning” and the “social fabric” is the idea of solidarity. The authors point out that action research must promote solidarity and they argue for the enhancement of solidarity in groups, organizations and communities for social and ecological sustainability and for the strengthening of the social fabric. They describe solidarity as a mindset and ethical practice, “a mode of interacting with local stakeholders, of understanding life in groups” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 148). They explain that: “Solidarity is not ‘equality’ but a heedful understanding that humans live in social groups that are more adaptive, happier, and socially stable when all members receive attention and consideration as human beings and when no small group of elites captures the shared resources of the group.” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 161).

Later in the book they explain that: “Many people wrongly conflate action research processes with equal treatment for every stakeholder. Action research is based on the premise of the equal worth of human beings, in terms of gender, age, aims, capacities, and experiences. However, people are not the same and treating everyone in the same way is unfair and impractical. Solidarity is not about erasing those differences but about finding ways for those differences to work in collaboration to create social-industrial-political situations in which the different talents, goals, and desires of the diverse participants are brought together to create practical, fair, and sustainable patterns of action and organization” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 186).

The book also provides concrete examples of building up solidarity through action research projects with different stakeholders in communities and organizations in the US, Norway and Spain. The authors argue that action research doesn’t have to be limited to local projects but can work at various social scales.

Action research is not about empowerment but a process of mutual learning

In the book, the authors confront the term “empowerment.” They consider it a misunderstanding to believe that you can “empower” people, and they emphasize that action researchers should not position themselves above other people as outside ‘experts’ who ‘empower’ people to solve their problems. They argue that action research is about understanding life in groups and that the action researcher must position herself “within the situation, actively seeking to understand and change it in interaction with others. It dissolves the false dichotomy between research and practice, between academia and ‘the real world’” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 30). They furthermore highlight: “Academics, practitioners, policymakers, citizens; we are all inquirers who, in different ways and roles, bring to bear diverse perspectives, experiences, and aims on collaborative processes of learning how to make sense of complex and confusing situations. Action research means mutual transformation as we navigate inherently challenging dynamics and unsustainable systems” (p. 30). By focusing on action research as a mutual learning process, the idea of empowerment is dissolved, as a more equal relationship is sought in the collaboration around learning and change.

With reference to Bradbury et al the authors explain, “Change is only sustainable when it is born of mutual transformation” (Bradbury *et al.*, 2019). They furthermore highlight that we need to change our relationships and liberate ourselves “from the dominant worldview and powers that we have internalized”. In order to co-create learning and change, it’s crucial to build mutual understanding and trust. The authors mention that it can be deeply challenging to understand a situation and create change at a personal, relational and structural level and that these processes often require hard, persistent and sensitive work. They explain that facilitating action research processes of mutual learning and change is not a bed of roses also but usually is quite challenging and requires us to face inherent challenges, power relations, negotiate the conditions of the process so that we find ways of dealing with multiple roles and relationships. This means that we need to embrace complexity and address emotions, differences and tensions rather than seeking for a false consensus.

Co-production and social innovation through action research

Another interesting thing was that the authors propose action research as a constructive approach to citizen participation, co-production and social innovation. Since the 1990 s it has been declared that there is a movement going on from New Public Management (NPM) to New Public Governance (NPG). This involves a shift from top-down micro-management and bureaucratic control to greater citizen involvement and co-production among public authorities, citizens, public service institutions, private companies, volunteers and other stakeholders to find and co-construct solutions to complex problems and to improve public services and policies. The idea makes sense but is not always an easy task, and often these kinds of so-called “dialogue processes” end up as pseudo- democratic. The authors claim that there is a paradox because “governance systems promote co-production but often fail to create con-

ditions in which it can be effective and generate systemic change” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 188). They point out that often the structural power inequalities and hegemonic forces are preventing the process from being open, democratic and dialogic. The authors use formulations such as “pseudo-equality, pseudo-inclusion, pseudo-consensus, and pseudo-change” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 193) and point out that in practice these attempts most often are not capable of creating sufficient space for critical reflexivity, dissensus or resistance. It often happens that the process becomes hampered by bureaucratic barriers and underlying power-relations and, after a while, people lose their faith and motivation for taking part. Instead of becoming a true co-production, it becomes at most a kind of consultation.

However, co-production and the inclusion of multiple stakeholders is needed to find solutions in relation to complex problems, and the authors suggest action research as a possible way forward because it allows new ways of relating, communicating, thinking and acting. It significantly depends on how these processes are facilitated and followed up upon. It is crucial that people feel confident and safe enough to express their experience and viewpoints and that different ways of knowing and expressing oneself are recognized. To transform governance systems and create systemic change, it is necessary to build up trust and nurture reciprocal and reflexive relationships where people experience that they can engage in a dialogic process without fear and oppression. It is also essential that these processes are followed up and do not slip into oblivion.

In action research we find a long tradition of working with dialogue, democracy, polyvocality, solidarity, social justice, mutual learning, change and evaluation as fundamental principles which are important to uphold to succeed. The crucial point is the extent to which action research can foster commitment to change, lead to structural reforms at the policy level, and thereby contribute to sustainable, long-term improvements. It is about democratizing policy-making processes and creating systemic change, and it requires courage by the policy actors and policy makers and the willingness to give up full control and move into the unpredictable. It also requires a role change from bureaucratic administrator to facilitator, to be able to formulate open questions, to listen and be curious rather than simply laying out manuals and procedures. After all, action research is not just a matter of “influencing policy makers but, more fundamentally, about restoring the social fabric of democracy” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 208), which means building up communities and social sustainability based on solidarity and democracy.

The book not only describes difficulties and paradoxes in co-production but also offers some compelling case studies of co-production, social innovation and deliberative practice through action research, offering valuable insights for scholars and practitioners engaged in community development, public service innovation, and related fields.

Action research in education

In the final part of the book, the authors present a vision of universities as learning organizations and raise a very interesting question, which I myself have been reflecting on for a while: “Can educational institutions be remade into authentic “commons”? They develop this

idea by explaining their vision concerning universities as “institutions with a broad remit to link forms of knowledge and research, to integrate teaching and research in active pedagogies, and to promote research processes capable of forming well rounded new generations of qualified researchers and solidary social actors”. (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 245). They criticize the tendency of universities to be characterized by siloed departments, hierarchical management, separation between research and surrounding communities, separation between research and teaching, the view of students as clients rather than learners, etc.

They claim that; “Schools and universities with their disciplinary departments and rigid degree requirements are characterized by competition among disciplinary units for resources controlled by senior managers. Those who actually produce the teaching and research and those who operate the accounting, human resource, physical plant and other systems are rarely able to challenge these rules enough to alter these structures. When they do challenge them, they often put themselves and their jobs at risk. Overall institutional decisions are made at the apex of the organizational structure far from the context of application” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 248–49). They furthermore argue that: “It is startling that such institutions, that claim to employ and nurture people with the knowledge and intellectual abilities to analyze complex societal processes, and promote effective change in a solidary way, operate this way. Most do not permit critical engagement by those who actually do the work and know much more about the teaching and research conditions than the central administrators. Operating this way is inefficient, a waste of opportunities for improvement and reform proposed by those who do the work, and a motivation killer. This model does not belong in institutions that produce and transmit knowledge and nurture new learners for the future, and yet it dominates them at present” (Greenwood, Ravn & Bartels 2025 p. 249).

Alternatively, they articulate their ideas on how action research can contribute to shaping universities as learning organizations and fostering more collaborative and transdisciplinary approaches to education and research. In this regard, they also argue that both researchers and students, can use action research to engage with organizations, institutions, and communities, fostering collaboration for social and ecological sustainability.

Universities as learning organizations must function as open systems that actively engage with their environments and provide continuous opportunities for learning. The authors propose action research projects as platforms for training students to collaborate in teamwork and transdisciplinary project groups. Learning is not only the acquisition of knowledge or skills but also involves understanding how we learn through social interaction with others. Joint learning is a co-generative process in which knowledge is created through shared experiences and collaborative inquiry with others.

It is about how we educate new generations to become social change agents rather than passive spectators. How we can strengthen their intellectual abilities to critically analyze complex societal processes and co-create change together with citizens and stakeholders in solidary and sustainable ways. Through action research, students can strengthen their agency and capability to work in transdisciplinary projects and processes based on solidarity and curiosity instead of favoring individualism or becoming obedient spectators. Action research can help students develop their agency to become citizens and professionals who actively contribute to changing our organizations and societies into more sustainable environments.

Among others the authors mention Arizona State University and the University of Cincinnati in the US, Deusto University and Mondragon University in The Spanish Basque country as alternative examples of universities inspired from action research and a more

collaborative mindset. As an action researcher and university teacher coming from Denmark, I could also mention Aalborg University and Roskilde University in Denmark as examples of how universities can integrate action research, problem-based learning, transdisciplinary collaboration and group work into their pedagogy and research activities. Not only have these two universities based their educational programs at bachelor and candidate levels on problem-based learning inspired by John Dewey and action research, but they also offer advanced PhD programs in action research, participatory research and related forms of collaborative inquiry.

Final remarks

Finally, as a reader and action researcher I highly recommend this book to everyone interested in action research, learning, education, organizational learning, community development, co-production, transdisciplinary collaboration, social innovation, sustainability and societal change. The book provides hope and shows pathways for people who are interested in collaborating and creating sustainable change rather than being ‘lost in space’ as spectators.

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