INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PARTICIPATORY FOOD SYSTEM RESEARCH: ENCOURAGING REFLEXIVITY AND COLLECTIVE RELATIONAL LEARNING

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Summary

This paper draws on an ongoing experience of supporting participatory action research for sustainable food systems in Brussels. To share our insights and identify learnings from this experience, we bring together discussions in the literature on the development of an urban food systems perspective on agroecology, the institutionalization of agroecology and of participatory action research. We show how stimulating reflexivity and collective relational learning, hold promises as a strategy for resisting the potential drawbacks of the institutionalization of participatory food system research.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, Sustainable Food Systems, Transdisciplinarity, Reflexivity, Collective Relational Learning.

Resumen

Institucionalización de la investigación participativa de sistemas alimentarios: potenciando la reflexividad y el aprendizaje relacional colectivo

Este artículo examina nuestra experiencia como miembros de un colectivo de apoyo y acompañamiento de varios proyectos de investigación-acción participativa de sistemas alimentarios sostenibles en la ciudad de Bruselas. Nuestra lectura se basa en discusiones y debates en torno a una perspectiva de sistemas alimentarios urbanos sobre agroecología, institucionalización de agroecología y de la investigación-acción participativa. Con esta discusión queremos explorar de que forma estimular la reflexividad y el aprendizaje colectivo y relacional, ofrece una estrategia prometedora para resistir las desventajas de institucionalización de la investigación participativa del sistema alimentario.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción Participativa, Sistemas Alimentarios Sostenibles, Transdisciplinaridad, Reflexividad, Aprendizaje Colectivo y Relacional.

1. Introduction

Action Co-Create, the first of its kind in Brussels

"How do we know when we are doing participatory action research?" This is but one of the many questions that we have tried to disentangle over the past three years, together with the participants of the Action Co-Create research projects for just and sustainable food systems in Brussels (Belgium). The research programme "Action Co-Create" was born in 2015 from the initiative of an employee at the Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation (*Innoviris*), who identified the need for supporting different research approaches to address societal demands, and work with the challenges raised by current urban environments. The research programme

exclusively funds projects based on Participatory Action Research principles (PAR). Initially, the programme solely supported PAR for sustainable urban food systems; later the call was extended to the more general theme of Urban Resilience. Action Co-Create is the first of its kind in Brussels and in Belgium[1].

Since the inception of the research programme, a budget has been allocated to ensure support for the PAR projects and programme. A consortium of a univer-

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1   Information on the Action Co-Create (which translates literally as ' the co-create action') research programme: http://www.innoviris.be/en/financial-aid-for-companies/brussels-aid/co-create-urban-resilience-companies.   Information on the PAR projects and the support structure: http://www.cocreate.brussels.

sity department and a public agency was formed to set up a support structure: the Action Co-Create Support Centre (hereafter referred to as 'the support structure'). This support structure aims at providing methodological and formative support for the co-creation process; facilitating synergy between projects and building peer to peer learning; facilitating the contextualization and restitution of knowledge; and ensuring participatory evaluation of the Action Co-Create research projects and programme. This article draws on our experiences as facilitators and action researchers within the support structure.

The institutionalization of participatory food system research

The integration of PAR into a public call for funding, such as Action Co-Create, can be seen through the lens of institutionalization. Following Lagroye and Offerlé (2011), we consider institutionalization as an "ongoing process" rather than a "single establishing moment". This position, inspired by Giddens' understanding of institutionalization as a structuration process (Giddens 1976, 1979), allows the consideration of the dynamic aspects of an institutionalization process: its ability to adapt and integrate changes. Moreover, and following Bourdieu (2001), we relate institutionalization to the creation of a distinctive field of practices with two main characteristics: autonomization and professionalization. As a matter of fact, to define Action Co-Create, methods, principles and criteria for the selection and assessment of the projects are set. By objectifying what is considered a "good" PAR project, who has to be involved, what are the expected contributions to the sustainability of food systems and urban resilience, the Action creates what Lagroye (1997) calls a field of practices external to individuals. In addition, it generates a process of professionalization, with new categories of actors involved in the definition and assessment of PAR principles (a board of experts, advisers, public administration, etc.) and a public management of new stakes (Lascoumes 2000).

The support structure of which we are part is a salient example of this process and the emergence of a "new category of expert at the science-policy-society interface" (Chilvers 2013, p. 284). These new experts enable enhanced public participation and deliberation in research programmes for the public management of food system sustainability and urban resilience. Shove and Walker (2007, p. 765) note that such participatory initiatives are "never 'neutral' and never evacuated of power", and can be experienced as processes of co-optation, "the effect of which is to neuter rather than embrace dissent" (*ibid*). Institutionalization dynamics at the science-policy-society interface, have stirred particular interest in agroecology debates. Advocates of transdisciplinary research noted how, in various ways, institutionalization processes possibly strip off agroecology

from its transformative potential (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013, Giraldo and Rosset 2016, Levidow *et al*. 2014, Rivera-Ferre 2018). Other authors choose to rather emphasize the potential of the institutionalization of agroecology to reconfigure food systems by upscaling local innovations (López-García *et al*. 2018), or by embracing transdisciplinary, participatory and action-oriented food system's sustainability approaches (Méndez *et al*. 2013, 2017).

Action Co-Create in Brussels fully embraces such a transdisciplinary, participatory and action-oriented approach in food system research. Since 2015, the research programme has sought to address societal needs by creating opportunities for research to contribute to the sustainability of urban food systems. The programme generates a lot of enthusiasm among researchers and practitioners, and offers a space for experiential learning in developing research practice that may be able to confront and transform food systems. At the same time, this institutionalization of PAR has potential drawbacks with regard to the transformative potential of participatory food system research. We identified here the reduction of participatory action research to a mere set of techniques, which includes the simplification of projects and the discouragement of critical thinking; the definition of PAR principles by a small number of experts (professionalization); the instrumentalization of participation; and the creation of competition between projects, which may reinforce existing inequalities. The shifting research practices thus raise new questions with regard to the reinforcement and weakening of peoples' capacities to confront and transform food systems.

Fostering reflexivity and collective relational learning in participatory food system research

In our work as a PAR support structure, we develop activities that aim to encourage reflexive and collective relational learning (Popa *et al*. 2015, Chilvers 2013). We build on the assumption that reflexive and collective relational learning can enhance people's capabilities to recognize and counter the drawbacks of institutionalization of participatory food system research. In this article, we share insights from our experience of working together with project participants, a public research and innovation agency, and policy makers, in a context of institutionalization of PAR.

To explore the potential of this approach, we first, situate the Brussels' Co-Create experience in debates in the literature on conceptualizing agroecology from a food systems perspective (Stassart *et al*. 2012, Francis *et al*. 2003, Rivera-Ferre 2018), and urban food systems in particular (Deh-Tor 2017,). We then focus on the need for participatory action-oriented approaches in agroecology research and why, in themselves, they do not guarantee a rupture with unsustainable food systems. After that, we share our experience of working in a PAR

support structure by situating the PAR support structure's posture and by narrating its three main blocks of activities. The first activity block relates most explicitly to the facilitation of group work in a PAR environment. The second reflects on connecting ongoing participatory action food system research with a food policy initiative. The third block focuses on an initiative to deepen participatory research governance. The three activity blocks are then discussed and analysed through the four dimensions of pragmatic reflexivity as developed by Popa *et al*. (2015) and the perspective of collective relational learning (Chilvers 2013). The article concludes with a reflection on transmitting and multiplying PAR practice.

2. Framing the facilitation of reflexive and collective relational learning in the institutionalization of participatory food system research

Broadening and institutionalizing agroecology

Whereas agroecology has its roots in the application of ecological principles to reduce agriculture's impact on the environment (Altieri 1995), the wide adoption of the term by social movements, governments, international organizations, and others, has broadened the discussion in different ways (Francis *et al*. 2003). By explicitly linking agroecology and food sovereignty, social movements tie agroecology closely to the transformation of unsustainable food systems (Rivera-Ferre 2018). The broadening of agroecology, from a focus on the ecological processes in agriculture to socio-ecological processes (Stassart *et al*. 2012), placed rural development much more firmly at its heart. Rosset and Martínez-Torres (2013, p.1) see agroecology as a strategy for the "contestation, defence, (re)configuration and transformation of contested rural spaces into *peasant territories*".

The meaning of agroecology keeps on developing now that concerned actors, such as NGOs and organized consumers, increasingly adopt agroecology (Hatt *et al*. 2016, López-García *et al*. 2018, Rivera-Ferre 2018). Nevertheless, it remains unclear how this political agroecology approach shapes urban imaginaries. From that observation, Deh-Tor (2017), inspired by their deep conviction that transforming unsustainable food systems requires transforming cities altogether, urge us to consider urban agroecology from an urban perspective. They invite us to resist the easy way of treating the 'urban' in 'urban agroecology' as a container, a context in which food growing, transformation, selling and eating is happening. Instead, an urban perspective implies a much more comprehensive exercise of rethinking cities, service provision, urbanism, and education agroecologically. For Deh-Tor (2017, p.8), this means also incorporating, at the heart of urban research:

"the values of agroecology which are explicitly addressing social and environmental justice, are culturally sensitive, non-extractive, resource conserving, and rooted in non-hierarchical and inclusive pedagogical and educational models that shape the way food is produced and socialised across communities and generations"

The more recent adoption of agroecology by international organizations such as the FAO, business, researchers and policy makers at different levels, however, relegates the values of social and environmental justice to the margins of agroecology (Rivera-Ferre 2018). Social movements and researchers therefore contend that processes of institutionalization tend to transform agroecology into a technical question, bereft of its political dimension (Giraldo and Rosset 2016, Collectif pour une agroécologie paysanne 2014, Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013). In that context, Rivera-Ferre (2018) argues that the widespread definition of agroecology as a science, as a practice, and as a movement as stated by Wezel *et al*. (2009), reinforces the idea of the very possibility of agroecology as a scientific discipline that is only loosely connected to practice and social movements. Arguing against the possibility of separating these different spheres, Rivera-Ferre (2018, p.16) identifies different mental models and narratives sustaining different agroecology approaches, which are "all composed of the inseparable elements of assessment (science), practices and management (politics: movement, policies)". Hence, the mere idea of connecting science, management and practice as such does not say much about the values and mental models being promoted.

These insights are crucial for exploring the potential of supporting participatory food system research in a context of increasing professionalization. The cooperation between researchers and practitioners as such, is no guarantee to keep food system research "away from the temptation of translating complex issues into seemingly straightforward technical questions, devoid of socio-political meaning" (Van Dyck *et al*. 2017, p.6). Joint experimentation and problem-solving involving people from inside and outside universities does not necessarily entail shifting power relations and/or moving away from expert positions. How then can we think about and act within the dynamics of engagement between different practitioners, including citizens, organized civil society, researchers, policy makers and others, as they try to align and cooperate through food system research? And how can this be done in ways that do not erase, but work with their differences and heterogeneous practices?

A reflexive approach to transdisciplinarity
Transdisciplinarity is seen as an important lever in agroecology (Méndez *et al*. 2013) and wider sustainability (Hadorn *et al*. 2006, Brandt *et al*. 2013, Mauser

et al. 2013). Transdisciplinary, participatory and action-oriented research approaches (referred to here as PAR), in the way we understand them, are orientations of inquiry based on iterative cycles of reflection and action (Reason and Bradbury 2001, Fals-Borda 1987, Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991, Kindon *et al.* 2007) that recognize that knowledge and expertise are widely distributed (Fine 2008), partial and situated. As such, transdisciplinary food systems research implies the engagement with food and agriculture in all its relations, from the political-economic, to soils to knowledge constructed outside (Western) scientific paradigms.

Transdisciplinarity, following Popa *et al.* (2015, p.45, building on Jahn *et al.* 2012), is a "reflexive, integrative, method-driven scientific principle aiming at the solution or transition of societal problems, and concurrently of related scientific problems, by differentiating and integrating knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge". In that definition, and important in the context of our work of supporting PAR, is the pragmatist approach of Popa *et al.* (2015) to reflexivity, which they relate to "collective processes of problem framing and problem solving through joint experimentation and social learning that directly involve the scientific and extra-scientific expertise".

In the critical PAR tradition, the importance of reflexivity is indeed widely stressed for its role in collective learning, for encouraging critical inquiry, questioning underlying assumptions and values, engagement with the understandings of and curiosity of the other (Reason and Bradbury 2001, Kindon *et al.* 2007, Fine 2008). Without an explicit reflexive dimension, according to Popa *et al.* (2015, p.47):

> "transdisciplinarity is confronted with the risk of either being reduced to formal social consultation, with no real impact in how knowledge is generated or integrated into policy-making, or evolving towards a politicized form of 'democratic science' in which epistemic aspects are subordinated to procedures of social legitimation."

In addition to reflexivity as a crucial awareness-raising mechanism, transdisciplinarity and PAR explicitly incorporate a strong action-oriented approach. It is this iterative combination of critical thinking, and a jointly agreed normative orientation for action, that gives the research its potential for emancipatory socio-ecological change (Kindon *et al.* 2007). This leads us to question how to foster the reflexive dimension in PAR learning.

Practicing reflexivity and collective relational learning?

The underlying assumption of fostering reflexive practice and collective relational learning is that it enables people to situate their experiences in relation to

significant others and the wider context while embracing an ethic of uncertainty and non-control (Felt and Wyne 2007). Following Chilvers (2013, p.295) and Felt and Wynne (2007, p. 70), reflexive learning concerns "insight into the assumptions which tacitly shape our own understandings and interactions", whereas relational learning involves learning "about the salience of new actors and their differences with our own assumptions". The emphasis on collective stresses the aspects of learning together.

To create the conditions that allow situated and reflexive approaches and relational learning, critical adult learning (Lakey 2010), experience-based learning approaches in the tradition of Freire (Freire 2007, McIntyre 2008), and critical teaching approaches (Hooks 1994) are helpful. In this tradition of fostering action-reflection-action processes, a variety of methods are deployed to invite participants to "confront their practical experiences on the field with other actors' values, visions and positions" (López-García *et al.* 2018, p.9), and "to move participants out of their comfort zones into encounters with new possibilities" (Lakey 2010, p.7). In the support structure of Action Co-Create, these sources of inspiration guide us in developing a working programme based on experience-based learning approaches within more conventional research contexts.

3. Methodological notes

This article's case study is based on the support of Action Co-Create during the first two and a half years after its initiation in 2016. This includes accompanying six projects in participatory food systems action research. In various ways, each of these projects brings together scientists and practitioners that closely cooperate to promote access to healthy food for all; to develop a logistical platform for alternative food systems; to explore and overcome barriers to urban farming; and to support transdisciplinary food system knowledge production in Brussels. The paper thus draws on our ongoing experience as action researchers and facilitators within a transversal PAR support structure. The fact of being both facilitators and authors in the narrative of a learning space, raises questions on "how to tell research-informed stories from below" (Tornaghi and Van Dyck 2015, p.1250). The case study narrative aspires to be part of a conversation that documents the facilitation of PAR food system research. Rather than aiming at objectifying the Action Co-Create experience, we seek to capture and unravel a few strategies that may inspire others to experiment with popular education strategies in formal research environments.

To carry through this ambition, we created spaces to reflect on our own work. The funder's request to explore the foundations for a permanent support structure for PAR in Brussels, for which we carried out interviews

with five members of the existing support structure and two group interviews with project participants, formed a main source of inspiration. We also drew on the reports and impressions from organized peer-to-peer intervision moments during which action research participants got together to discuss their experiences. The preparation, facilitation and feedback moments of group work within the six PAR projects was another valuable source of information. These included six individual feedback moments with project coordinators to get their impressions of the support structure's activities. Finally, participation in the juries of the research programme provided crucial insights for the support structure's reflection and action.

To explore the case study, the remainder of the paper first focuses on the approach of, the methods mobilized through, and the activities organized by the PAR support structure. The four dimensions of reflexivity, as developed by Popa et al. (2015, p.48), will then serve as a lens to discuss how the PAR support structure's posture and working programme foster reflexivity. This includes the:

- "collaborative deliberation in building a shared understanding of the overall epistemic and normative orientation of research";
- the importance of framing research problems;
- the "role of social experimentation and social learning processes" in concrete contexts;
- and finally, connecting the acknowledgment of values, power structures and ideologies to an explicit agenda of social transformation.

4. Case study: supporting a PAR-programme for sustainable food systems in Brussels

The PAR support structure

Through the Action Co-Create support structure, we organize transversal activities among participants from different projects, facilitate group work of individual projects (especially during moments of reflection or tensions), and facilitate the circulation of knowledge. The support structure also plays a role in the PAR projects' six-monthly evaluation committee, in developing impact evaluation and (semi-informally) as an intermediary between the research teams, the research funder, and the evolution of the funded programme.

Since the beginning of the project, we have enjoyed a lot of freedom in developing a PAR support approach, bringing in mixed sets of experiences from earlier involvement in transdisciplinary projects, in agroecology research, as well as experience with and a deep interest in facilitation skills and popular education. The support structure started with set objectives, some target criteria, and a number of ideas for support activities, but without a clear programme. The consultation of the PAR project participants on a regular basis was impor-

tant to define the precise content of the support structure's activities. The support structure did, however, set the frame. Experience-based learning and peer-to-peer exchange guided the design of the support practices put in place. This methodological choice, we expected, would encourage PAR participants, including ourselves and a member from the funding agency, to adopt a reflexive posture.

Being guided by critical PAR approaches, we do not consider people as barrels that can be filled up with information and pieces of knowledge; instead, following an experiential learning approach, we seek to foster learning through sense-making. Secondly, we aim at intersecting knowledge and experiences. Not only do we believe that knowledge dialogues are enriching and deepening insights, we also think that transdisciplinary work requires learning about the underlying assumptions that shape our own understanding and those of others (Wickson *et al.* 2006). And thirdly, we have confidence in the people we work with, their skills and experiences. Our posture is one of fostering affinity between practices while seeking to acknowledge differences, rather than collapsing practices and backgrounds one into another.

Activity block 1: facilitating collective work

For most participants in the first batch of the programme, PAR was a very new practice. The seven research consortia, including the support structure, employed in total about thirty people. In reality, however, many more people were involved in the programme through what was referred to as living labs, and other spaces where project participants and other concerned people interacted. The large majority of the participants in the transversal activities were people that are employed between 50-100% of their paid labour time through the projects. Most 'researchers' in the projects (about 10 persons), had been actively part of research projects before, but were not familiar with inter-, not to mention transdisciplinary research approaches. The majority of the other participants had previous professional experience in civil society organizations, companies or public administrations, and had little or no formal research experience or PAR experience. Most research consortia intentionally included persons with specific skills in group facilitation and participatory work to coordinate the project. For Innoviris, the research funder, Action Co-Create, was a-typical as well. While the Brussels Region has a history of funding applied and partnership research programmes, they were mostly business oriented.

This novelty and lack of experience with PAR approaches created confusion and fear within projects, and raised many questions. What exactly is co-creation? How to co-create? How do we know if and when we are co-creating? Does co-creation differ from PAR? During the first two years of the programme, we focused

on facilitating exchange between research participants through two-monthly intervision groups with participants from all projects, a yearly "Co-Create day", the organization a PAR training course training, and the facilitation of workshops within some of the projects.

The ways in which we organized, designed and facilitated these interactive moments allowed us to share our vision on PAR with project participants. We did not start from a given definition but did share a set of principles and values that seemed crucial to us based on our former experiences. This was summarized in April 2016 as:

- a *practice-oriented science*, which includes both adopting a listening approach and an interest in research effects;
- *critical theory*, meaning that research is linked to social and ecological transformations;
- *popular education* and *direct education*;
- *democratization of knowledges* and *dialogos de saberes*; *transdisciplinarity*; *horizontal organization*; *strong sustainability*; *relational and situated knowledges*;
- *openness* and *experimentation*; *collective learning (CACOC, 2016)*.

Consequently, in our work, experts and written manuals are not given the knowledge monopoly; instead the participants' experiences are considered constitutive expertise as well. To discuss PAR methodologies, we mainly start from the participants' knowledge and experiences (including our own) as a basis for exchange and reflection, which is then complemented with literature.

The joint working moments aim to address challenges that, (1) participants identified as 'an issue' during earlier meetings of intervision groups, that (2) we observe being recurrent topics during exchanges with project participants individually, or that (3) advance the support structure's objective of facilitating synergy in Brussels PAR for just and sustainable food systems. The issues often refer to challenges such as how to involve the 'right' people at the 'right' moment, or how to create conditions that allow for co-creation with people with very different interests, needs, temporalities, and ways of working.

Activities therefore include exercises in which participants are invited to share experiences or perspectives. We use techniques such as drawing, moving debates, or closed-eyes exercises to relive or imagine particular situations, etc., from which to start discussions. The Kolb-learning cycle and the action-learning spiral have been helpful in the design of these activities (cfr. Kindon *et al.* 2007). Gradually we also introduced other tools or method-oriented inputs to create 'something to hold on' for PAR participants, such as a limited library

with sources of inspiration on critical approaches in PAR and training on PAR-techniques by Jacques Chevalier and Michèle Bourassa[2]. Building capabilities through the acquisition of new methodological and practical competencies seems to be helpful within our work to support PAR-participants in discovering tools for collective analysis. In designing activities and training we try to systematically evaluate what capacities we help build and why (cfr Chilvers 2013) in order to avoid automatic pilot tool-based approaches. In addition, a small budget is available for projects to use for training purposes. We avoided long methodological lectures, but did include 'mini' lectures of a few minutes while introducing activities.

Participants' feedback has been very important in shaping our agenda. Feedback mechanisms were often included within the workshops, but we also organized individual and collective feedback moments. From this feedback, we learned that the deepening reflexivity approach created both comfort and discomfort, or even anxiety. Participants expressed their comfort of sharing anxieties and methodological doubts, and showed reflexivity in their research approaches. In addition, the support activities contribute to the creation of a community of PAR food system researchers. On several occasions, project participants and evaluation committee members also voiced their concerns over the chilling effects of enhanced reflexivity. For some projects, worries over inclusive design, for example, resulted in the multiplication of meetings without tangible results. Participants' feedback resulted in enhanced attention for activities that stimulate action, such as the encouragement of working with intentional boundary objects (Mélard 2008). Participants were encouraged to think about concrete examples, such as the joint production of research reports or the collective engagement with the Brussels food policy to make different understandings and aims of sustainable food systems tangible. Also, the construction of frameworks that enable the holding of different viewpoints together is encouraged.

Activity block 2: connecting practitioners, researchers and policy-makers

The support structure also aims to invite participants to go beyond the dynamics of their projects to address the political conditions shaping the research contexts of which they are part. This work of situating and consciousness building on how research and collective actions (could) shape each other, is leading towards increased collaboration between the PAR projects. One example is the development of joint initiatives in policy advocacy work in the Good Food Strategy. This public policy (2016-2020) gathers and supports a large number of initiatives that aims at "putting food at the heart of urban dynamics, by addressing it in all its dimensions,

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2   https://www.participatoryactionresearch.net/.

whether economic, social or environmental". The Brussels-Capital Region government initiated the strategy and gave the environment and agriculture sections of its public administration the lead in its implementation[3]. Consultation and co-construction mechanisms involving at least some of the concerned actors (associations, NGO's, citizens, experts, etc.) formed the basis of the Good Food strategy's formulation. For its mid-term evaluation (2018), the lead administration asked the six Co-Create projects on sustainable food systems to formulate recommendations to adjust and make the strategy evolve on the basis of their research results. As a support structure, we coordinated and facilitated this policy evaluation process. While tensions emerged around the difficulty of maintaining diversity and divergent findings and political strategies, joint (facilitated) efforts were expected to lead to stronger outcomes in terms of thoughtful content as well as political weight.

Instead of following a "one-way process" consisting of the projects assessing the strategy and formulating recommendations to the administration, which is common in policy advice, the choice was made to organize a full day of dialogue and exchange between the projects' partners and the public administration. The idea was that they would jointly build proposals and recommendations. This choice was initially motivated by the project partners' expression of 'lack of time' to carefully read the strategy and write down recommendations. With hindsight, the methodology appeared to be fully in line with the co-creative and reflexive research approaches the support structure seeks to support. Thematic discussion groups, mixing project partners and persons from the administration, formed the main part of the workshop. In each group, research results and reflections were shared, as well as the progress, evolution and current limits of the strategy; this was in order to co-create proposals and recommendations for the future of the strategy. At the end of the day, the proposals were reported back at a plenary session in the presence of higher authorities of the administration and a member of the ministry in charge of the Good Food strategy. According to the participants, this day was a success: they appreciated the good quality of the exchanges, the projects had the feeling that their feedback was useful and taken into account, participants learned from each other.

What did we learn from this day? First, the primary importance of having the main concerned actors (research partners and public administration) actively involved in every step of the process: preparation, discussion, reporting and conclusion. The direct involvement of the participants in the elaboration of the recommendations was empowering. The sustained process also fostered discussion between actors who did not usually meet up. The joint working moment also creates strong relations between

the projects and the administration, which in turn foster the continuation and implementation of the recommendations by the public administration. Second, we felt that the creation of a safe space for dialogue allowed full commitment of the participants. The day was a good reminder for participants that while everybody works with their own constraints and realities, all are working in the interest of moving away from unsustainable and unjust food systems in Brussels. It is important to note that all the actors involved were willing and interested in collaborating, and open to debate; this provided a strong basis for the chosen process. Last but not least, the integration of the research results in public policy is a key moment both for the implementation and continuation of these outputs after the projects have ended. The organization of a specific event made sure that the projects included this important step in their busy agendas, in a way that goes beyond the 'handing over' of a report or written recommendations. The support structure played an important role here in creating space for dialogue and bringing the reflexivity needed for successful outputs. In this sense, the Good Food experiment answered a need for creative, action-oriented, and collective experimentation to make learning from and about public dialogue more situated, interactive, public and anticipatory (Chilvers 2013).

Activity block 3: participatory research governance, a jury of peers

The participatory move in research also includes upstream citizens' engagement through the development of the participatory governance of science. The involvement of citizens and concerned actors in the distribution of research money for public interest is part of this. Action Co-Create addresses this issue in two ways: through a two-tier selection of project development, and through a jury of peers.

The selection of proposals in Action Co-Create happens in two rounds. Since 2017, and after a first round of selection by an expert committee, the pre-selected projects receive 6-month's funding to build their full proposal through a participatory approach involving all the concerned actors. This evolution is explicitly aimed at enhancing a more deliberative approach in the problem framing and the project design. For the first three years of the programme, the selection of the projects followed a 'classical' process, in which the evaluation and selection is made by a panel of so-called 'experts' in the field of PAR, urban resilience or other themes related to the submitted proposals. These experts are mostly researchers and, in fewer numbers, social workers or other field workers. To some extent, they are all familiar with such contexts and selection processes. However, very few of the panel experts live or work in Brussels, and some of them come from abroad. We believe that the process of selection shows some limits regarding the ambition of Action Co-Create: namely being grounded in Brussels' urban reali-

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3   For more information, please see https://www.goodfood.brussels/.

ties. Moreover, the selecting panel enhances the process of professionalization that concentrates the ability of setting research priorities, as well as defining what is a good PAR project (or not) in the hands of a few experts.

From this observation, the support structure, together with the funder, started to implement a jury of peers in 2018. In addition to the panel of experts, this jury of peers has to become part of the project selection committees. The motivation is that citizens, who until now have been absent from the committees, have knowledge that is often missing around the expert table: the intimate knowledge of Brussels daily life, the 'thickness' (Geertz 1973) of these realities, that provides context and meaning to the research ideas and proposals. The jury of peers is a group of eight persons. The size of the group was chosen because it allows a balance between intimacy and personal involvement. The group is composed of people from different ages, genders, racial and socio-economic backgrounds. We used our networks, well grounded in the city, to invite people who are not familiar to and not well represented in Action Co-Create. This participation is unfamiliar, both for the participants and for the funding body, and requires a thorough reflection and preparation.

The first step to involve peers in the process was to create desire and trust. We took the time to contact and meet people personally to explain what their contribution to the jury could be. We are convinced that each one of them has valid and relevant knowledge for the Action, and that their participation is an opportunity to link their daily life to a collective issue. Hence, we put emphasis on the idea that being part of this process is a means to meet and share with people from different backgrounds, as well as to impact urban development by bringing one's own specificity into the selection committees. Confidence and trust building were especially important in this step as a number of the people we invited expressed a fear of the institutions and a distrust in institutional procedures.

After individual meetings, the next step was to build a sense of community in the group. Taking the time to meet each other and build a group that would be supportive of the active involvement of all was a major concern. Only after that were future jury participants invited to better get to know Action Co-Create through the reality of the fieldwork. Participants were invited to go and meet some ongoing projects to get familiar with the stakes, challenges and difficulties of PAR projects. Facing the high level of complexity of the projects, some participants were afraid of not being able to understand the projects or to fulfil the task that was allocated to them. To overcome these fears and doubts, participants were invited to investigate each project in pairs. In addition, the trust between the group members was a precious support. The full process alternated moments of action and of reflection to reframe the partici-

pants' field experiences regarding the main guidelines of the Action, and the points of attention and questions to consider when reviewing the proposals.

5. Discussion: guiding learning in the heart of institutionalizing PAR

We showed how Brussels' Action Co-Create and its transversal support structure are creating an infrastructure sustaining changes towards participatory world-views in research and city making. As introduced earlier, considering institutionalization as an "ongoing process" (Lagroye and Offerlé 2011) allows becoming aware of the dynamics that are constantly re-building Action Co-Create and its ability to evolve. In addition, PAR capacity building, as argued, does not say much about the type of participatory research approaches, which are built and reinforced. The existence of a PAR programme as such, does not guarantee learning that is rooted in reflexivity on one's own assumptions and those of others. As demonstrated, the support structure took up the challenge of stimulating reflexive, collective and relational learning through joint experimentation and collective deliberation around well-defined topics, to build capacity against the instrumentalization of PAR in a context of institutionalization.

While it is definitely too early to answer many of the questions on the transformative potential of participatory food system research in Brussels, we go back to Chilvers' (2013) understanding of relational learning and the four dimensions of reflexivity as defined by Popa *et al.* (2015) to share some observations on building critical PAR capacity. We do this by engaging with the risks of institutionalization outlined earlier (namely *reducing participatory action research to a mere set of techniques/ which includes the simplification of projects and the discouragement of critical thinking; defining PAR principles by a few experts (professionalization); the instrumentalization of participation; and the creation of competition between projects, which may reinforce existing inequalities*).

Opening Up to Ground Learning

Action Co-Create shows how government support can play a key role in fostering a shift in culture with regard to creating legitimacy for different knowledge and voices in formal research settings. The strong socio-normative character of the programme encourages both university researchers and other practitioners to think about research in ways that acknowledge the mutual co-constitution of knowledge and the worlds of which they are part (Jasanoff 2004, Popa *et al.* 2015). The research programme encourages joint deliberative processes between people and organizations that may not usually cooperate, or encourage organizations and persons that may not have previously framed their practice in a research perspective to do so. The funding of a 6-month grant-writing phase and a 3-year research

phase creates the time-space for PAR participants to be deeply involved, curious, and really try to understand points of view, world-views, and assumptions of others around issues of joint concern. The strong focus on joint problem-solving encourages people to experiment and imagine the possibility of failure (dimension 3 of reflexive science as defined by Popa *et al.* 2015). Different actors experienced the latter in many ways. Whereas the funder and some project participants emphasized the possibility of failure, a small business actor would repeatedly voice the perspective that what was going on was, "their real life or real business, not an experiment".

The recent introduction of a jury of peers increases the potential for deliberation over the orientation of research action and on the socially relevant framing of research problems (dimensions 1 and 2 of reflexive science as defined by Popa *et al.* 2015). The approach of a jury of peers aims at placing everyday urban realities at the heart of the selection process and making it more participatory. Integrating "ordinary" citizens in the selecting committee in addition to the "classical" experts, offers an alternative to professionalization processes that lean towards concentrating the power of defining what is a valid PAR project in the hands of a few professionals. The preparation and integration process leading up to people's participation in the jury is of primary importance; this allows their empowerment and therefore their full participation in the selection of research projects to be funded. This change in research governance, as time will tell, could possibly contribute to opening up the programme and avoid the creation of a funding scheme only available to a group of local and professionalized PAR experts.

Support from a Semi-Insider to Stand Still, Look Back and Look Forward

Being immersed in a project does not necessarily encourage self-awareness and self-reflection. The support structure makes a difference here by creating time and space to slow down, look back, and exchange with peers. One of the important elements of the activities the support structure organized – either through the facilitation of meetings "within" individual PAR consortia or through transversal activities (such as the Co-Create days and the intervision groups) – was creating the space, maybe even the mental permission, to leave comfort zones, to take a step back. Taking a step back could mean to adopt the position of what Starhawk (2011) calls 'the crow', to keep an overview of what is happening in the projects:

> "what are our goals, and are we moving toward them? What might change in the future, and how do we adapt? What obstacles and unforeseen crises might we encounter, and how do we prepare? Who is keeping their commitments, and who is letting things slide? What's falling through the cracks?" (Starhawk, 2011, p.130).

At other moments, the created spaces would help to adopt an under-view, the snake position in Starhawk's learning axes, to focus on the group's process to bring out patterns of emotion, exclusion/inclusion and communication in the groups.

While these moments of reflection were generally well received, participants expressed the wish to receive more information from the support structure. Simultaneously working with different groups indeed yields an overview of some of the issues PAR participants struggle with in different project contexts. Furthermore, we dedicate a significant amount of our time to 'think with' participants in dealing with methodological, strategic or group dynamics issues. This gives us privileged access to PAR issues and strategies, and raises questions about how to better transmit learning from the members of the support structure.

Stimulating Peer-to-Peer Work

The intervision groups and joint working meetings were also collective learning moments for people with different backgrounds of practice, including academic researchers. While some participants noted how these moments of joint learning put them on an equal footing, other people found it difficult to be part of these conversations. Learning from this feedback, and in addition to the existing transversal spaces, we now experiment with the creation of spaces that bring together people with similar 'practices' within PAR. For example, through a forum where researchers discuss transdisciplinarity[4], or the facilitation of gatherings where 'link creators' such as project coordinators or social workers meet. With the creation of these spaces, new possibilities are created to exchange experience and name how normative commitments, power dynamics and ideological orientations are at play within transdisciplinarity and action-oriented research (resonating with the fourth dimension of reflexivity in Popa *et al.* 2015).

Some of the participants of the transversal activities stated that peer exchange was 'reassuring' as it helped overcoming feelings of isolation about 'not knowing', experiences of insecurity about PAR methodologies, and frustrations about group dynamics. Furthermore, in one-to-one conversations several participants explicitly reported that these collective moments created some level of detachment. The latter experience was useful in the critical re-evaluation of project-specific work programmes and stepped out of project managerial approaches. The intervision groups also contributed to anxiety. Some participants expressed disappointment about the fact that the workshops did not bring 'clear

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4   Namely the event "transdisciplinarity inside the university" https://uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/iacchos/laap/evenements/la-recherche-transdisciplinaire-au-sein-des-universites.html

answers' on what is co-creation or how to enact it. Some participants stated that they were looking for more solution-oriented tools or content from other people that were 'more experienced' with PAR, rather than exchanges on what were perceived to be 'project-specific' issues. This feedback suggests the need to explore the possibility of integrating more instrumental learning techniques, as well as working on capacity when dealing with uncertainty.

Fostering Relationality

The transversal working moments, we showed, do contribute to reflexivity on project design and participatory methodologies. They bring questions such as 'who to involve, when, how and why' to the heart of the research practice. Nevertheless, the fact of bringing people together about a question does not necessarily lead to attention for multiple framing (cfr Rivera-Ferre 2018), or grappling with the underlying social and political drivers that are causing food related social and ecological problems.

From our experience, the concrete working sessions about the use of boundary objects (Mélard 2008), as was practiced in some of the projects, was helpful. Also the invitation to work with different actors (cfr the Good Food policy forum), and the organization of activities that encouraged project participants to think about their research practice in relation to their messy socio-political context were crucial in PAR capacity building. These moments enabled gaining consciousness about what holds programme participants together (beyond the individual project objectives), while clarifying the intentions and wider aspirations of different project participants (reflexivity dimension 3 of Popa *et al*. 2015, Chilvers 2013). As such, these working moments also encouraged research consortia to gain trust to cooperate by identifying and working together on shared issues.

6. Conclusions

The very existence of projects such as the PAR support structure of which we are part, is the evidence of public research evolving towards the professionalization of organized participation. We expect that more of these will emerge in the coming years. We hope that sharing our insights will raise awareness on the issue of instrumentalization of participatory research (in agroecology and beyond), as well as making steps in the greater effort of systematizing and transmitting learnings from this emerging Brussels-based PAR community.

While the PAR support activities help us to learn and get experience among the participants of the Action Co-Create programme, we also aim to pursue our work through the multiplication and diversification of these spaces. Such an approach, we hope, will enable learning beyond small groups of people that receive research funding and prevent the creation of participatory action research experts, which little by little might enclose their own newly created expert circles. A funding body open to reflexivity and change (cfr the jury of peers), and the close cooperation with rooted civil society actors are helpful in keeping spaces open and diversifying research trajectories. Keeping in mind de Sousa Santos' (2007) thoughts on starting from the absent voices to reinvent emancipation in 'knowledge ecologies', civil society actors are now gradually invited to be more closely involved not only in the research as such, but also in research evaluation and research proposal making.

While encouraging others to step out of their comfort zones, by inviting PAR participants to think about changes they can implement in their project context, by stimulating them to counteract seemingly given social, cultural and political structures of the Brussels food systems, we are constantly challenged to leave our own comfort zones and open up spaces for learning. The enthusiasm of both public officers and PAR participants in working together on the joint evaluation of the Brussels' food policy strategy shows this. The relational learning strategies we pursue are focused on changing frameworks of reference, values and research approaches. They are based on an ethic of non-control, which seems to create discomfort and anxiety among many PAR participants. On the basis of our experience, however, we are convinced of the importance of creating spaces for reflexive and relational learning in fostering attitudes of non-control and openness to diversity and change.

This article is based on our experiences as privileged participants in a PAR programme. The insights presented, above all, have the goal of starting the collective writing of an active memory of experiments while they are still running. The writing process in itself is a way of telling ongoing research stories from below. We hope that the unpacking of our experience of building reflexive and relational learning inspires others to navigate the tensions and contradictions of participatory food system research, all the while looking for social and environmental justice.

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