



PARTICIPATION AND POWER

**IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH
AND ACTION RESEARCH**

**Marianne Kristiansen &
Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen (Eds.)**

AALBORG UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CHAPTER 5

ACTION RESEARCH AND EMPOWERMENT IN DENMARK

- experiences from three different contexts

John Andersen, Annette Bilfeldt, and Michael Søgaard Jørgensen

Abstract

This chapter presents experiences from action research projects in Denmark in three contexts:

1. A *public nursing home*, where the objective was to improve the quality of eldercare with special reference to social life among residents, as an alternative to the rigid and bureaucratic focus of New Public Management
2. A *marginalized urban area*, where the objective was to develop a community centre which could strengthen social capital and facilitate empowerment of both residents and welfare workers
3. A local project about *sustainable housing*, where the objective was to design and build houses which could act as prototypes and inspiration for the development of sustainable housing.

The chapter illustrates and discusses how action research can, with the active participation of local citizens, public employees, private employees and environmental organizations amongst others, contribute to strengthen these actors' capacity to actively influence the development of society and contribute to better social and environmental conditions.

The first part of the chapter introduces the core concepts of action research and empowerment with references to international contributions. The next part concerns the larger societal context and the concrete methodologies applied in three projects, and the successes, failures and results from these three cases. The last concluding part compares and reflects upon similarities and differences in the methods and empowerment mechanisms across the different contexts, and illustrates thereby the roles of Danish action research.

Action research and empowerment

Action research is an umbrella term for research based on democratic and inclusive values where “democratically developed knowledge” contributes actively to socially innovative and collective actions. In action research researchers and practitioners work together in “*a shared commitment to democratic social change*” (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Action research is not a fixed method or a collection of principles, theories and methods. Action research should be understood as *an orientation to inquiry* in which research supports collective action and social innovation and at the same time produces new knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Together with the participating practitioners, action researchers should define their research questions and the agenda for collective action should be based on the participants’ needs, experiences and visions (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Thus optimal knowledge creation is generated through shared learning cycles of problem definition, design and implementation of strategies for social change (Nielsen & Svensson &, 2006).

The ideal of the action research approach concerns the co-production of knowledge between social actors and action researchers who contribute actively to democratic change within the field where the research is conducted. This contrasts with, for example, the positivistic research tradition where the ideal is that the research has an external and “objective” relation to the research field and its actors. Thus action research challenges the research methods which separate the researchers and their research “object” (Clausen & Hansen, 2007) and give the social actors a role as “subjects” in the research process.

Action research stresses the close connection between *understanding* the world and *changing/transforming* the world. Knowledge becomes a product of collective knowledge developed in creative processes and practice cycles which consist of 1) *criticism* of unsatisfactory conditions within a given field, unfairness, underprivileged group conditions etc., 2) *investigation and documentation*, 3) *reflection* which includes the *development of a concrete vision and transformation strategy* and 4) *action* (Andersen & Bilfeldt, 2010). As one of the creators of action research, Kurt Lewin, stated: *The best way to understand society is to change it!* (Lewin, 1946).

Action research is “*value oriented and seeks to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of humans, their communities, and the wider ecology we participate in*” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The ontological starting point within the tradition of action research is that societal structures are not unchangeable. Those engaged in action research can be empowered and can influence the conditions of life and society. Epistemologically, action research frames the creation of knowledge where reflection is linked

to action and can be defined as research which contributes to social mobilisation and empowerment (Kemmis, 2008). Kemmis employs the concepts of “practice” and “praxis”. “Practice” is based on ingrained behaviour/habits. “Praxis” is the social and morally obliging action that can arise from the critical and self-critical reflection and dialogue in the action research process (Kemmis, 2008).

Historically speaking, the concept of empowerment is associated with the work of Paulo Freire, who defined empowerment as “*the ability to understand social, political and financial contradictions and the ability to act against the oppressive influences of real life*” (Freire, 1974).

In line with Freire’s thought, empowerment can be defined as “*processes through which social groups improve their ability to create, manage and control material, social, cultural and symbolic resources*” (Andersen & Siim, 2004).

The American professor Richard Levin offered a wider definition of empowerment in continuation of the Latin American tradition:

“... the all-round capacity, resources, information and knowledge, confidence, skills, understanding, organization and formal rights which people can use individually and collectively to decide what is going to happen to them. I also include people’s mobilization of collectively visions and imagination, intelligence, creativity, enthusiasm, courage and energy in a liberating project” (Levin, 1995).

As a critical paradigm the empowerment approach has had a revival over the last decades because it places collective action, and changes of unjust opportunity structures in the centre of societal change in contrast to neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism (Craig & Mayo, 1995).¹⁵ Firstly, it fosters horizontal empowerment, strengthening trust, commitment and networks inwards and downwards e.g. between different groups at the workplace or in the community. Secondly it concerns vertical empowerment strengthening power and the possibilities of multilevel influence outwards and upwards, e.g. in relation to power centres outside the workplace or the community, including governmental policies. Successful action research implies robust empowerment which often results from a mix of horizontal and vertical empowerment processes and becomes mutually strengthened over time (Andersen, 2005).

Even though the empowerment strategies are often tested on the local

¹⁵ The concept of empowerment is sometimes (mis)used in a misleading way by neo-liberals as a pure individual and entrepreneurial concept unlike the heritage and understanding from Paulo Freire (Craig & Mayo, 1995)

community level and/or with certain social actors, it is crucial to point out that empowerment strategies also embrace the societal (macro) level. Strategies of empowerment deal in this way with changes on the societal level, changes on organizational and institutional levels (meso) and changes in peoples' everyday life nexuses (micro level).

Experiences gained from three action research projects

Action research project in a nursing home for the elderly

The first project took place at a public nursing home in Copenhagen and was based on the Critical Utopian Action Research model CUAR developed by the Danish action researchers Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, Birger Steen Nielsen and Peter Olsén. Robert Jungk's "future workshop" model was the central activity for developing future scenarios and changes supplemented with a network conference organized as a research workshop.¹⁶ By presenting the procedure and experiences from the project we will show how the action research contributed to residents possibilities of social interaction (Andersen & Bilfeldt, 2010).

The aim of the project "Quality in eldercare seen from an employee's point of view" was to create a social needs oriented alternative to the predominant New Public Management (NPM) control of the nursing home sector (Bilfeldt & Jørgensen, 2011). Under the NPM regime, the employees work under strict budget control and quality control systems based on standardized measurements. This standardization of eldercare based on detailed job descriptions gives limited resources to care workers to attend to the social needs of the elderly people.

The purpose was to develop better quality within elderly care focusing on the social dimensions of care. The project process was divided into three stages:

- Stage 1: Group interview with employees.
- Stage 2: The future creating workshop.
- Stage 3: Task force groups and the network conference.

Stage 1: Group interview (4 months): The first stage began with a group interview with employees from the different departments in the nursing home. Inspired by Bjørg Aase Sørensen and Asbjørn Grimsmo, the group interviews were planned to focus on how the employees handle challenges

¹⁶ Research workshop is described in Nielsen, Nielsen & Olsén (1999).

at work, their insights into the dilemmas they face and also their criticisms of the conditions of quality in the nursing home (Sørensen & Grimsmo, 2001). The role of the researchers was to facilitate the reflections of the employees and to create a dialogue and, on that basis, to draw up a list of problem fields in a “problem catalogue” for subsequent action oriented activities.

Stage 2: The future creating workshop (4 months): This stage was organised as a future creating workshop with the employees and ran for two days. The workshop consisted of three stages: a critique phase, a utopian phase and a realization phase.¹⁷ (Jungk & Müllert, 1984).

The rules in the critique phase are that all participants must be consistently negative and must focus on the challenges in their work. Based on the group interview, the researchers sum up the problems and dilemmas that were documented in the problem catalogue. In the utopia stage “reality is invalidated” and the participants express their dreams and desires. In the realization phase, the participants develop action plans for how the utopian perspectives can become reality. The realization phase was followed by work in task force groups that developed action plans in relation to some of the utopian ideas, including how to get more time for caring for the residents and a better living room for the residents.¹⁸

Stage 3: Task force groups and the network conference (4 months): In the final stage, employees worked in task force groups with their action plans in co-operation with the researchers and the management of the nursing home.¹⁹ The participants at the network conference were employees and management of the nursing home, the researchers, employees from another nursing home, experts, people from the trade union, a dementia coordinator, eldercare researchers, working life researchers etc.

The employees at the nursing home presented the utopias from the future workshop to the guests, and explained how the task force groups worked with the action plans. Afterwards the participants asked clarifying and critical questions about the utopia and the action plans. The invited experts contributed with their knowledge through presentations and gave input to the employees’ action plans and the colleagues from the other

¹⁷ In all three phases of the future workshop the researchers make notes and put all the issues on posters hanged on a wall. The future creating workshop is thoroughly described in Jungk & Müllert (1984).

¹⁸ For a detailed review of the methods used in action research, see also Clausen & Hansen (2007).

¹⁹ The network conference is described in Nielsen, Nielsen & Olsén (1999).



*Figure 1: Participant presentations at a similar network conference.
(Source: Authors).*

nursing home contributed to the workshop with their own experiences with eldercare.

The elderly from the nursing home did not participate in the conference. By virtue of the insight the employees have gained through observing and interviewing the elderly about their needs, the employees obtained an advocacy function on behalf on the elderly to express their needs.

From vision to action

The employees felt trapped between the needs of the residents and scarce human and economic resources. Because of the elderly policy of the municipality “as long time as possible in their own homes”, an elderly resident is now weaker, when he/she moves into nursing homes than previously, and at the same time there is less staff than previously. The quality standards (part of the NPM), which are based solely on the physical abilities of the residents, were not consistent with the employees’ ideas of quality in care that include the social quality of the residents’. In the afternoons there were no activities in the nursing home, the residents felt bored and the spatial design of the building made it difficult to gather the residents.

On the basis of the critique, a number of utopias concerning quality, focusing on social life, were developed. We now turn to the output from the future creating workshop related to spatial design.

During the future creating workshop, a group of employees developed a utopia consisting of a plan for the reconstruction of the nursing home

which would include a new living room. The idea was to make two resident rooms into a new living room, close to the lift, where the staff passes back and forth and there are windows facing the street. The walls were to be painted in a bright colour and the lamps should give a soft light. The purpose was to create a physical room which could support the informal communication between the residents and between the residents and the nursing staff.

Conversations between the staff and the residents about their wishes concerning their social life, and an employee's observation of the residents bunching together in the hall around the lift had been the background of the ideas that lead to the development of the utopia. The residents preferred staying on the "square" in front of the lift instead of sitting in the distant living room which was almost always half empty and where the television was the central activity. The residents who were not able to walk to the "square" often asked the staff to help them get to the chairs by the lift. At the "square" they could talk with the people walking to and from the lift, greet one another's relatives visiting and have contact with each other and with the staff crossing the "square" during the day.

The staff at the nursing home chose to back up the informal empowerment process of which the habit of the residents "to hang out into the square" was a token. The decision was made to move the living room into the "square" instead of moving the residents into the current living room. In this way, better physical surroundings could be created around less institutionalized social activities, strengthened by the placing of sofa sections shielded by house plants placed in a semicircle.

At the end of "the future creating workshop" a task force was formed to present the ideas to the manager and afterwards to the residents, so that their comments could be added to the suggestions. After negotiations with the management, the presentation of the living room plan was received positively by the residents, as the nursing home had the possibility of getting the renovation financed, because it could be included in the reconstruction plan which the local authority had prepared in co-operation with the management.

Empowerment perspective in the reconstruction plan

The planning of the interior decoration of nursing homes is normally made without the involvement of employees and residents. In this project, the employees were acting as advocates for the residents. Instead of limiting the elderly's autonomy by maintaining the placing of the original living room far away from the "square", a suggestion was made which could strengthen the social life at the nursing home. As elderly people who do not walk so well often remain seated in the chair where they have

been placed, the idea was to change the location of the dayroom in an attempt to support the elderly's need for social life in spite of physical weaknesses.

The "square utopia" is an example of a suggestion that could only be developed because the employees were focusing on the importance of the social alternatives to the NPM standardizing the work. If the employees had not gathered their practical insights into the habits and wishes of the residents for spontaneous social interaction, the management of the nursing home and the local authorities would not have been presented for an architectonic alternative to their plan.

From the horizontal (inwards) empowerment perspective it is important that the employees were able to gather their practical knowledge from observations about where the residents wanted to sit and to transform this into a new vision. Supported by the researchers, the staff developed concrete initiatives which could support the social life of the residents. From the vertical (upwards and outwards) empowerment perspective it is important that the proposal reached the management and the local authorities and that it actually was used as part of the reconstruction plan.

From a learning perspective, the employees in the nursing home project gained experience by facilitating the needs of the elderly into a more socially framed modernization project.

The risk of "blind actions"

Gaventa and Cornwall realized that while it is clear that action research brings new insights, priorities, problem definitions and themes which can be object of changes, they point out that even if the participation methods of action research promote democratic and inclusive knowledge development, there may be a risk of "blind actions" (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). It is a challenge to avoid undemocratic transformation initiatives built on dystopias in the form of ideas which strengthen one group's power at the expense of other groups' interests. Action research within eldercare requires special attention to the risk of such "blind actions". Partly because the elderly at the nursing homes are physically and/or mentally weak and may find it difficult to express their disagreement about utopias and action plans made on their behalf, and partly because there is a specific risk of misuse of power at nursing homes. The elderly, who are dependent on receiving nursing care, may be insecure about expressing disagreements with the management and the staff. This stresses the need to facilitate the voices of the elderly in the process, which in this project was done through interviews with the residents.

In projects where dystopias exist (e.g. about providing regular bedtimes before 9 PM so that the night nurses should not be too busy, bans against

residents' birdcages etc.) other employees have stopped these suggestions before they were put into reality. In projects with weak actors, such as the elderly at nursing homes, a serious risk is implied by the development of suggestions which deteriorate the quality of life for the elderly instead of improving it. The question: "Is this proposal democratic compared to *all* the residents' needs?" was discussed in plenum and in workshops at the conference with the invited experts. In this connection the attention was especially drawn to the demented residents. The dementia coordinator and the representatives from the senior citizens organization pointed out that residents, who suffer from dementia, need to sit in a special shielded corner away from the other residents and their relatives. Accordingly this knowledge was incorporated into the modernization suggestion.

Action research within the local community – Community Centre Gellerup (CCG)

The next example comes from another practice field: the empowerment based local community work and development of a community centre in Gellerupparken in the city of Aarhus. In terms of income, this urban district is the poorest in Denmark and a large number of the citizens are immigrants.

CCG was initiated by a local branch of the public library, community workers, community activist, local associations and NGO's with the objective of developing a multifunctional citizens community centre uniting library services, health promotion, counselling service (job, education, citizenship rights) for ethnic minorities (the majority among the residents). The idea with this type of community centre was to bring public welfare services "back to (or closer) to the people", mediating the gap between citizens daily "life world" and the public institutions and professional "system world". The objective was to create daily practices and strategic capacities, which in a holistic and flexible way responded better to citizens' needs than mainstream fragmented bureaucratic organised social services. The CCG as socially innovative institutional platform emphasised commitment to practical knowledge sharing and learning across the different professional groups (social workers, nurses, librarians etc.) working directly with the citizens' needs and daily problems in the neighbourhood. Furthermore the community centre was a common platform for active networking and capacity building among community activist, NGO's and associations in the neighbourhood

The development of the community centre in the neighbourhood of Gellerup was facilitated by action researchers through an empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2005) from 2005-2007 (Andersen & Frandsen,

2007). The community centre development project was in part linked to a seven year long integrated area renewal program financed in part by the European URBAN 2 program and also inspired by the Imagine Chicago and the Asset Based Community Development approaches (Andersen, 2008).

The CCG-case illustrates that the capacity to create and pursue local institutional reforms and making empowerment possible is built up over a period of time. There must be energy from the bottom and support from the top. This example shows that a cross-sectorial and empowerment facilitating practice and organizational frame is practicable. Rather than a simplistic distinction of citizen-ruled bottom-up-strategies and management controlled top-down strategies, the CCG-case points to the productiveness in what we could call “bottom-linked” innovation strategies (Andersen, Delica & Frandsen, 2013). “Bottom-linked” strategies can be defined as strategies which are based on a dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, empowerment facilitating institutions and networks, and on the other social mobilisation among the citizens. Robust empowerment strategies can build on the combination of mobilization of the citizens and the facilitation of committed professionals (social workers, health professional staff, librarians, etc.) who are willing to make a difference.

The difference between this example and the former example is that we here are talking about a more complex local community context with many stakeholders involved. CCG has a long past history with roots in an active NGO, project and activist environment, among other things about the EU-supported URBAN project which framed an empowerment inspired urban regeneration strategy from 2001-2007 (Andersen, 2008). An important part of the local context is a long tradition of a close working relationship at the management level between all the public institutions based on the specific challenges and social needs in the area. Persons employed within the institutions in Gellerup (e.g. social educators, healthcare workers and teachers) receive a community course about the citizens in this area, the area history and about the effort to develop citizen mobilization (empowerment) through interdisciplinary co-operation and conflict resolution to meet the local needs and challenges.

CCG is a multifunctional learning, counselling and activity centre where the library shares premises together with the Health House, the People’s Information, the Job corner (job counselling) and a number of voluntary association (e.g. the Red Cross, homework assistance, IT guides, immigrants associations) see figure 2.

The crux of the community centre construction – the result of many years of development work – was:

Community Centre Gellerup

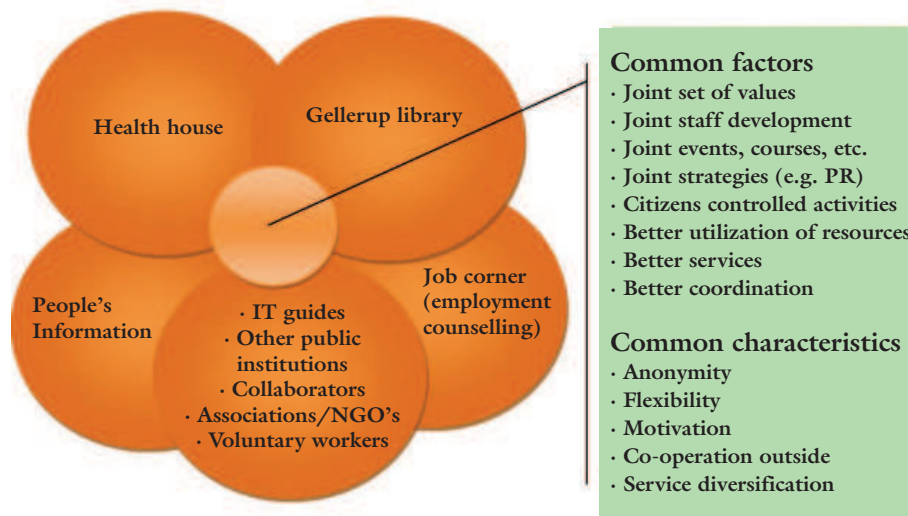


Figure 2: Outline of Community Centre Gellerup

1. Health, work, education and other counselling have been decentralised which makes the close contact to the citizens and the communication between the citizens and the system possible. Especially the disadvantaged groups with multidimensional problems see the Health house, "Peoples Information", and the "Job corner" as less bureaucratic than the traditional social security office and the employment centre.
2. Cross-sectorial organization and better knowledge sharing across the professions. This counteracts the escape from responsibility and development of the professional competence towards a holistic approach to the citizens' needs and resources. A cross-sectorial and knowledge shared approach creates a learning environment for the empowerment facilitation.
3. The co-operation with various types of volunteers improves the utilization of resources, enlarges the activity field and builds up a reflexive culture.

Peoples Information – handles open and anonymous counselling in connection with social conditions, employment, education, citizenship, residence permit, etc. Therefore the employees of the People's Information act as "advocates" and "bridge builders" vis a vis the municipality. The

Health house is a co-operation between more municipal authorities e.g. dental care, nutrition, child nurses. The activities comprise various thematic groups, who e.g. work with health promotion, birth control, mental health, children's diseases and nutrition. The groups for young mothers work more deeply with the challenges and problems young first-time mothers may have.

For example a "Tupperware" model is used for the project "From Woman to Woman" where a health visitor or a midwife meets and teaches a group of women in their own homes about sexual and reproductive health. According to the employees it was of great importance that the teaching took place in the private homes. The women experienced openness and trust in the group and in this way experiences were shared. Another example of citizen controlled activities is the workshop about crime and khat abuse problems, which was held by young Somalis and followed up by the local Somalia association. Here a tabooed and complex problem was really discussed.

In the evaluation, CCG employees expressed that they had been better at using each other's expert knowledge when dealing with citizens and volunteers, e.g. in connection with health promotion, job seeking etc. (Andersen & Frandsen, 2007). The example from CCG points to a new role for the professionals in their work with the citizens. The professionals (e.g. librarians, health visitors, social workers and integration consultants) were not delivering "standard services" to the individual citizens; they were able to act as empowerment facilitators on more levels and in various roles under the auspices of the community centre. An important role is e.g. to assist in facilitating knowledge sharing and in building up networks with other public institutions (e.g. schools, clubs, day care centres, social services departments and job centres) and with active mobilization of local informal and formal networks, e.g. volunteer organizations, senior citizens councils, sports clubs, social workers, etc.

The empowerment approach involves meetings and work with citizens face to face. The citizens are supported in self organization and learning processes, i.e. horizontal empowerment. The empowerment strategies also deal with the capacity to change policy and influence outside the local community, i.e. political mobilization and vertical empowerment.

The advocacy role is a central dimension of community empowerment: the professionals enter the role as "advocates" in co-operation with or on behalf of citizens and groups which are not heard or are stuck in the existing systems. An example of this is a social worker that undertakes the advocacy function for ill citizens, who have been forced to participate in job training programmes which they are not able to complete. As a consequence the citizens are in danger of losing their social security benefit.

In the case of CCG, the agents of change were both professionals in public institutions and community activists. They were able to draw on a particular path dependency, namely the close collaboration between the public institutions in the area which has been developed since the beginning of the 1990s in the so-called *Gellerup model*. This model entails that new public employees in the area are introduced to common basic values of active citizenship and inclusion and to the particular history of the area. The core values for the professionals are loyalty, commitment, multiculturalism and solidarity with the urban neighbourhood and its citizens – rather than identification with the formal administrative bodies of the City Hall.

Furthermore regular monthly meetings at the management level are arranged between the welfare institutions: schools, day-care institutions, social centres, crime prevention work etc. In periods of trouble and social unrest in the area (e.g. the riots during the ‘Cartoon Crises’ (Andersen, Larsen & Møller, 2009)) this network also meets with community leaders (e.g. the parents’ network working with youngsters in the area). CCG builds on an organisational concept of knowledge and experience being shared in which collaboration goes on across professional borderlines in order to accomplish specific tasks, such as cultural activities, information services and informal learning sequences. This might include language assistance, courses in IT, homework assistance, club activities, as well as individual, anonymous advice on e.g. health, housing, labour market, and family matters. It might also include advice to parents on their parental role. In this respect, the CCG and the staff employed there commit themselves to act both as *detectives* trying to spot the needs that are to be fulfilled amongst citizens in the neighbourhood and act as *advocates* in helping citizens and groups in dealing with possible problems and getting them through an often complex bureaucratic system in the public sector.

In Denmark, a national program for transforming public libraries into community centres was established in 2008 following some pioneering ‘first-movers’ amongst public libraries based in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This suggests that libraries in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are taking major steps to facilitate empowerment of the local community and ethnic minority groups.²⁰

On the basis of the CCG experiences, the Danish Agency for Libraries

20 International examples of libraries reinventing their roles are Chicago’s public libraries (see Putnam & Feldstein, 2003), Queens Library in New York (www.queenslibrary.org), Idea Store in Tower Hamlets in London (www.ideastore.co.uk) and Toronto Public Library in Canada (www.torontopubliclibrary.ca). £80 million in funding was available through the Community Libraries Fund for public libraries in UK engaging in partnerships with in the local communities (Goulding 2009, p. 80)

and Media have, by securing a government grant of 2.5 million Euros, established a national development programme for libraries' transformation to Community Centres in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, in which approximately 15 public libraries take part.

Action research in sustainable housing - the future single-family houses in Køge municipality

The third action research project is about the development of sustainable solutions within housing.

In the project, the term "sustainability" was defined on the basis of criterion for the energy consumption of the houses, the building materials' environmental impacts and the plant coverage (a so-called 'bio factor') on the building site. The project was a co-operation among a number of different stakeholders and was facilitated by a local Agenda21 centre, "The Green House" ("Det Grønne Hus") in Køge which is supported by the municipality, local utility companies, and project funding. "The Green House" works within a number of fields such as housing, mobility, water and wastewater, waste, etc.

The project is one of many environmental projects in recent years where more sustainable solutions have been developed and tested on commercial terms. The idea to the project "The Detached Houses of Tomorrow" ("Fremtidens Parcelhuse") was developed in 2002 in a co-operation between the local Agenda21 council in Køge and "The Green House" in Køge. The project was an action research project which empowered the "Agenda21" centre to initiate a development process where the centre facilitated development of more sustainable solutions within housing.

The objective of "The Detached Houses of Tomorrow" was to organise a "future-oriented prototype building project" (www.fremtidensparcelhuse.dk). The purpose was to show that it is possible to build and live in an energy and environmentally friendly neighbourhood – without being a do-it-yourself builder and without deteriorating the comfort and quality of the houses (Fremtidens Parcelhuse, 2005), and at the same time improve the competences and willingness of the construction industry to build houses in more energy and environmentally friendly ways. The main part of the project was to display energy and environmentally friendly houses either as finished or projected houses south of Køge on an area owned by the municipality. The plan was to build 86 houses (single-family houses, twin-houses and terraced houses) which subsequently were to be sold to citizens.

Agenda21 centre as facilitator

“The Green House” had an action research role in the project by facilitating co-operation among a number of different interests. Together with Køge municipality, the Danish Building Research Institute (SBI – Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut), Eco-labelling Denmark, and a national centre for urban ecology “The Green House” developed a project proposal which attracted funding. Therefore it was possible to employ a project manager and some experts in “The Green House” and involve other partners that could assist architects, building craftsmen and construction companies in the projecting of their houses according to the requirements concerning energy, environment, plant coverage on the building site, etc.

As one of the first activities, a workshop was conducted with construction companies, architects, etc. where the companies could comment on the criteria of the project. One of the key issues was that the houses had to live up to the new Nordic Eco-label criteria for single-family houses which were developed at the same time. At the workshop, “The Green House” facilitated co-operation between construction companies, architects, etc. This resulted in horizontal empowerment of environmental concerns of “The Green House” through new co-operations between both larger and smaller companies and between conventional and ecological construction companies on environmental and energy saving issues of house building.

The subsequent project activities were:

- The finishing of the sustainability criteria of the houses, and of the district plan where these criteria became a requirement for building on the sites in the area,
- Sale of sites to construction companies or architect companies,
- Planning of the houses and counselling of these companies about strategies to fulfil the criteria of the project which included the new national building regulations and its requirements for energy efficient buildings, etc.
- The construction of the houses (see example in figure 3),
- Exhibition with the finished houses (in some cases only the design of the house), where interested citizens were able to buy the houses,
- Five weeks display of the houses before the buyers moved in.

The building of the houses began in 2006. By the end of 2012 approximately 50 out of 86 houses had been built. The project lost interest among citizens, as many other building projects during that period, because of the financial depression which developed from 2008 and led to the limited sale of sites and building of houses.



*Figure 3: Example of a house built in “The Detached Houses of Tomorrow”, Køge
(Source: <http://www.ny.fremtidensparcelhuse.dk/>)*

In line with the principles of action research concerning critique, study, reflection and action, “Det Grønne Hus” and the researchers from The Danish Building Research Institute associated with the project, carried out an evaluation to assess the energy consumption in the houses compared to the theoretical estimations, and analyse the experiences from the occupants of how it was to live in the new houses. The study showed that lower energy consumption was achieved in several of the new houses compared to houses of a similar size. However, the study also showed that there was some discontentedness and problems with living in sustainable housing. Some of the occupants expressed discontent with the indoor climate, and the limited possibilities of controlling the indoor climate themselves. The information from the companies responsible for the houses about the installations and instructions of how to operate the installations was too limited (Kristensen & Jensen, 2010).

The lack of information to the occupants is a potential “blind action” from the construction industry and architects at the expense of the occupants’ possibilities of using the sustainable house in practice. For instance this might imply that the occupants, because of lacking knowledge about the house’s energy system, choose to open the windows to get a breath of fresh air. This might mean that the energy saving potential of the house is not achieved. Another risk of “blind action” lies in lacking coordination between the craftsmen at the construction site. For instance a vapour bar-

rier was incorrectly installed and was therefore perforated when the occupants tried to nail pictures on the walls, which resulted in heat loss and thereby higher energy consumption in the house.

From experiment to sustainable transition?

The project shows how a local initiative – an Agenda 21 centre like “The Green House” – through an action research project with non-profitmaking as well as commercial participants can ensure both horizontal and vertical empowerment of the interest of creating a more sustainable development. This empowerment was achieved by ensuring a wide degree of participation from the municipality, research institutions, construction companies, etc. in the project “The Detached Houses of Tomorrow”. The participation was achieved because many actors all were able to see that their interests could be strengthened through the project.

The case also shows that horizontal as well as vertical empowerment is closely related to national financial and political dynamics. With the national and global financial crisis, the interest in buying houses in “The Detached Houses of Tomorrow” was, as earlier mentioned, weakened – as on the rest of the real estate market. Despite this, the experience from the project has contributed to a horizontal empowerment of the environmental interest. Environmental considerations became important within a new urban development project in the local harbour area and within a new local social housing project.

The project has also contributed to some vertical empowerment of sustainable housing. The Nordic Eco-label criteria for single-family houses were, as earlier mentioned, tested as part of the project and afterwards some of the participating companies integrated low energy houses into their assortment offered to customers all over the country and used the eco-label as a public approved quality label. Furthermore “The Green House” has advised other municipalities about how sustainable housing projects are to be planned and implemented.

However, the experiences from “The Detached Houses of Tomorrow” and a number of other building projects also show a number of blind action-like challenges to a continuing empowerment of the interest of sustainable housing (Jensen et al., 2012; Jørgensen et al., 2012):

- It is the energy consumption per m² and not the total energy consumption which is the focus of sustainable housing projects. In some places, relatively large houses are built, so the energy consumption per person is not necessarily low.
- It is not always possible to achieve such low energy consumption as the projecting of the house promises, as the users of the house are not

well enough informed about energy efficient operations of the installations in the houses (ventilation, central heating, etc.).

- The building regulations make it possible for construction companies and architects to compensate for a large energy consumption by placing solar cells or solar panels on the roof. However, the total energy consumption will not be lower when lacking construction innovation is compensated for by merely installing a renewable energy facility.
- Today sustainable houses are built so that they look like normal houses. In this way a wider group of citizens are attracted but they are not necessarily environmentally concerned.

By evaluating and communicating positive as well as negative experiences from the project, “The Green House” and the other researchers have contributed to the empowerment of other actors within sustainable housing who did not participate in the project. The importance of analysis of experiences from environmental projects is confirmed by van den Bosch (2010) who points out that Dutch analyses of experiences from environmental projects have been the basis of similar and/or larger projects and created more permanent sustainable changes. It requires that the interactions between the participants in a project and with the social context are analysed so that conditions for future initiatives can be identified. Ornetzeder and Rohrer (2009) also points out that experiments and analyses of experiences are important elements in creating direction and inspiration in striving towards a more sustainable development through research and market development.

From practice to reflective practice - perspectives and challenges

Common to the three cases is research, seeking to further democratic and societal improvements through knowledge development and experiments within eldercare, within counselling and support of marginalized groups through local community work and within sustainable housing. Table 1 gives an overview of the three cases.

In the following similarities and differences between the three action research projects are summed up. The diversity of the cases shows that action research is conducted within rather different societal areas. Furthermore, the cases also show that local initiatives can empower actors outside the involved institutions and organisations. The first case was a local project which dealt with a general societal problem. The background was stress and frustration among the employees at not being able to offer the

Experiences from the three cases	Nursing home: Quality within the eldercare	Local community: Community Centre Gellerup (CCG)	Sustainable housing: "The Detached Houses of Tomorrow"
What were the background and the goal of the project?	<i>Background:</i> Individual stress among the staff and lack of social life of residents. <i>Goal:</i> Development of better quality within the eldercare.	<i>Background:</i> Area based urban regeneration strategy and empowerment approach. <i>Goal:</i> Community Centre used for cross-sector co-operation about citizen's needs. Encourage active civic culture and active citizenship.	<i>Background:</i> Lack of supply of sustainable family houses. <i>Goal:</i> Show it is possible to build sustainable houses for ordinary people without compromise on comfort and quality.
Who was involved in the project?	Employees, management, residents, another local nursing home, senior citizens organizations, dementia coordinators and researchers.	Immigrants, NGO's, voluntary organizations, social workers, librarians and researchers.	Local environmental centre, municipal administration, researchers, architects, construction companies. Citizens as customers.
What were the roles of the action researchers?	Facilitate and frame the process of change, document, support the task forces, add knowledge, involve other external parts with additional knowledge.	Facilitate co-operation and building of trust between volunteers, citizens and professionals. Communicate knowledge about socially marginalized urban areas and empowerment of local actors.	Create local interest, establish project group, apply for funding, facilitate development of environmental criterion, support construction companies, analyse experiences.

Central processes and methods?	Group interviews, future workshop, observations and interviews of the residents, task force groups, network conference with nursing home employees and experts.	Facilitation of common goals and criteria for success based on empowerment evaluation	Integration into district plan, matchmaking between companies, technical counselling, full scale exhibition, interviews of occupants.
Challenges and barriers?	The risk of un-democratic blind actions – due to power relations and lack of knowledge.	Horizontally: the various professions were to learn to work together with empowerment in the local community. Vertically: The municipality management was to acknowledge the strength of a cross-sector community centre.	Financial crisis implied not all the houses were sold. Some construction companies not very innovative. Too little information to occupants about use of house installations. Lack of exchange of experiences among occupants.
What results were achieved?	Reconstruction of the nursing home that could frame informal social activity between residents, and residents and employees. Reduction of stress for employees.	CCG locally strengthened. From the local to the national level: Launch of a nationwide program: Libraries transformed to community centres in deprived urban areas.	Lower energy consumption. Municipality and housing association integrate sustainability into subsequent projects. Environmental centre advises other municipalities. Companies integrate sustainable houses into their assortment.

Table 1: Characteristics for the three cases of action research projects.

social dimension of care. The focus was aimed at a socially weak group's interests, senior citizens living at nursing homes. The case shows how the action research project contributed to empowerment of the residents (framing possibilities for social life activities) as well as empowerment of the employees (less stress by framing the possibilities for informal social talk with the residents). In terms of Kemmis' concept of praxis, the project contributed to an important change (Kemmis, 2008). The daily practice of moving the residents to sit in front of the lift and giving social care to the residents left in front of the television in the old living room was substituted by a new praxis. The new living room framed a social praxis for informal talk and social activities between the residents and between the employees and the residents.

The case concerning the community centre CCG was local to begin with. At the same time, CCG took its starting point in national and EU financed programmes for local empowerment strategies in socially deprived areas with focus on improvement of the area through empowerment and resource mobilizations (Andersen, 2008). Central to the institutional empowerment was the development of expertise in handling concrete social needs and development of a continuous work for network and resource mobilization with the citizens. The community centre structure may, according to Kemmis, be characterized as a platform for development of an institutional reflective "praxis" aimed at the co-operation of employees across professions and resource mobilization (Kemmis, 2008).

An important rationale in the development of CCG was, moreover, that citizens on the margins of society needed coherent professional and accessible counselling and service at street level in the neighbourhood. This required a practice across professions and a platform for voluntary association and active citizens, who could co-work and at the same time be "the advocates" for citizens needs and interests vis-à-vis the municipality and e.g. employers.

The sustainable housing case was locally based, but the goal was to achieve both horizontal and vertical empowerment of groups working for a more sustainable development in relation to housing. The case shows that it was necessary to involve many different actors to create new environmentally based directions of development. The term "action researchers" should here be understood as both researchers and other experts who are able to facilitate, contribute with analyses, etc. – like the Agenda21 centre "The Green House".

The project is different from the two other projects in the sense that market mechanisms were used to enable changes. In Kemmis' terminology, the existing routine based practice for construction of houses was developed into a reflected "praxis" where the sustainability requirements and

support from “The Green House” formed the basis of the companies’ competence development within sustainable housing. The construction companies were attracted by the market possibilities and were maybe also afraid of losing market shares to the competitors if they did not participate themselves. The project also showed that the market of sustainable houses is sensitive to the socio-economic state of the housing market. Despite this, the project has created both horizontal and vertical empowerment of sustainable housing. Some of the involved actors have used their experiences as arguments for initiating similar projects where they can build on the new competences. Also some actors outside the project have initiated projects with reference to the experiences from the project.

The three cases illustrate that development funds and programmes make it possible to initiate action research projects with the purpose of encouraging and enabling more democratic, inclusive and sustainable agendas. However, the many funds and programmes targeting public institutions also include risks for “blind actions”, e.g. at nursing homes where a continuous flow of projects could cause stressful daily life for employees as well as for the senior residents. As the regular staff at the nursing homes does not increase and the demands and expectations from the society become bigger, it is important to be aware of this challenge. When planning action research it is important to consider the time and resources necessary for the anchoring and follow-up on the initiatives which are developed during the project.

Whether action research creates empowerment outside the involved work places, local communities etc. depends, among other things, on whether better frameworks for influence on social conditions are created and whether involved actors are able to use and pass on experiences from one project to other projects and initiatives. One example is the initiative for a national development programme for libraries’ transformation to Community Centres based on the Gellerup experiences. Another example is the changes in the legislation on district plans which has been implemented nationally after pressure from The Municipality of Køge and other municipalities that have been involved in sustainable housing projects. The changes imply that a municipality in future will have better possibilities to make demands on aspects of environment and energy of new buildings within a local area.

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