

Action Research - Justice in Action?

Some reflections on power, ethics and sustainability

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Abstract

Based on qualitative interviews in Indonesia, Namibia, and Uganda, the paper describes the role of power structures in either fostering or blocking processes of change leading to more sustainable livelihoods. Two effects stand out: 1) holders of positions of leadership control access to and use of resources on the basis of local rules; 2) the degree of adherence to locally accepted notions of justice influences not only the legitimacy of these leaders, but also the sustainability of resource use. Attempting to support “just” leaders through programs of “empowerment” with funds from industrialised (i.e. “rich”) countries may, however, not be an option, because this might be viewed as yet another “Western” interference.

Introduction

Orlando Fals-Borda saw PAR (Participatory Action Research) as a methodology which had grown out of a specifically Latin American experience, seeking to ensure “a satisfactory productive cycle of life and labour in human communities” - and therefore “its aim is to achieve ‘power’ and not merely ‘growth’ for the grassroots populations” (Fals-Borda, 1988, p. 2). Though the word does not appear, I see the implicit drive behind this approach as a search for justice.

Taking the title *Effective Change Management Using Action Learning and Action Research* (Sankaran et.al, 2001) as an indication, the successful spread of action research may have to do with adopting the modern value of effectiveness as the rallying cry: those who hold positions of power do not have to start fearing something might be taken away from them. Rather, they can expect assistance for their endeavour to increase effectiveness through innovation.

Is there anything wrong with this development? Is making things more efficient not inherently “good”? I remember a friend’s reaction when I said, referring to the Malaysian irrigation authorities I was about to study some 25 years ago (and fearing they would not want to look at their own work critically): “They just want me to help them improve their work.” He responded: “But you do not want them to do their work less well, do you?”

And is the resolution not already contained in the growing consensus to support “power with” rather than “power over”?

The question remains: Power to do *what*? In evaluation a similar concern is expressed in the two fundamental questions: “Did we do things right?” and “Did we do the right thing?” The first question refers to that fundamental “modern value” of effectiveness, while the second is directed towards the relationship between the project or organization being evaluated on one hand, and the environment in which the organization operates and the project takes place. At least in the participatory forms of evaluation -which take care to invite as many “stakeholders” as possible - there is an implicit concern with justice when considering the relationship between the project or organization and the environment as – more or less - “appropriate.” When asking “Did we do the right thing?” it might turn out that it was appropriate or right for one (or some) stakeholders, while it was not appropriate for others – because they had to pay a price.

We often talk about the necessity for a holistic – or systemic - orientation, or, alternatively, about inclusiveness. A holistic view of a social system should include the balance of power between different groups and how it is maintained or changed. Yet I rarely find suggestions on how to explicitly deal with the changes in the balance of powers which almost any intervention will trigger – knowingly or unknowingly. That there is no way to avoid this was brought home to me in the course of non-action oriented field research about the role of local languages for the effectiveness of development communication: whether around the Lore Lindu National Park in Sulawesi, Indonesia, in the Omatjete Communal Area in Namibia, or in the Nyakasongola District in Uganda, a white researcher is seen as a representative of a rich country, and people ask to what extent this research will benefit them – as directly as possible.

This has forced me to reflect not only on the relationship between local power structures and the sustainability of resource use and institutions, but also on the ethics of research: to what extent is it “ethical” to do research aimed at improving development communication without providing the kind of immediate assistance which local people themselves believe to be necessary for development?

Justice as a question of balance

The white researcher represents a link to the richer part of the globally unbalanced distribution of resources. And unless this disbalance is addressed, s/he is – at least initially – thought not to have a right to talk about local injustice(s). This was articulated on two separate occasions when the suggestion to define justice as a balance between self-interest and the interest of others came from the white researcher.

In Namibia the research assistant refused the white researcher the right to call a local person owning 100 head of cattle “rich” - because that person was still poor compared to an average German. This fact seemed more important than considering the scarcity of grazing due to an extremely low rainfall of less than 300 mm per year, which means that the owner of a herd of 100 head of cattle needs roughly 20 square kilometres of grazing land for himself alone – in a densely populated communal area where this reduces the grazing available to others.

In Indonesia, discussing *Koyaanisqatsi* with a group of activists working for the local TNC (The Nature Conservancy), the white researcher was reminded of the global “irony” that the “Producer Countries” of the North continue producing technology, while at the same time recommending to the “Consumer States” of the South the use of “biological” agriculture – where “biological” ways of production had been the norm before Western (industrialised) interference.

These experiences have lessened my enthusiasm for participation as a means to satisfy the human need for dignity, which Anisur Rahman’s account of the experiences of a women’s group in Bangladesh ten years ago (Rahman 1993, p. 182) seemed to put at the same level as the satisfaction of material needs:

We know that there is no easy and quick solution to our problem of food and clothing. But we as women did not even have the right to speak. In our organisation we can now meet and speak, and share and discuss our problems. We feel that we are now human beings. We look forward to our weekly meetings where we stand up and speak - we can thereby release ourselves as we speak the truth.

At the same time, these experiences did not invalidate the argument as such: Justice refers to a balance between satisfaction of self-interest (or need) and satisfaction of other people’s interest (or need). This “definition” seems interculturally valid, because it leaves room for different conceptions of both interest and needs, and for different experiences or notions of balance: “balance” is not restricted to measurable equality.

Measurable equality is not applicable anyway when it comes to the balance of psychological needs – such as dignity, understanding, appreciation – which are explicitly called for in all forms of participatory and dialogical approaches.

Measurable equality *is* applicable when it comes to the management and use of natural resources – which is where the global imbalance between the “North” and the “South” has now become “touchable” for everyone with access to the internet: just go to <http://www.bestfootforward.com/footprintlife.htm> and get a reading of your personal footprint.

Obviously, too much of a measurable imbalance on the physical level affects the balance on the psychological level, even for those who are not in a position to alter the physical (im)balance, because they cannot make decisions about resource use – except at the level of private consumption. There is however, hardly any disagreement that sustainability of the global life support system as much as of the global economic system needs a better balance in the global distribution of access to and use of resources.

Power as a balancing mechanism

This can be discussed under the topic of “rights” – as in the rights-based approach to fighting poverty (Alsop, 2004; McNeil and St. Clair, 2005). Kofi Annan’s formulation of “freedom from want” has provided an easily accessible formula which established a link between hunger and dignity in the discourse at the global power centers (United

Nations General Assembly, 2005). The question remains: who will guarantee the fulfillment of these rights?

One common answer – particularly for activists – is to focus on the bigger picture and campaign for political and economic decisions which might safeguard the human right to freedom from hunger. This approach constitutes a rich field for action research projects. It follows, however, the mode of “power over” – using the kind of countervailing power originally proposed by the Latin American proponents of PAR. In this paper, I would like to suggest reasons for a complementary, less visible approach: to invite those who can make wide-ranging decisions to have a second look at the congruence between their proclaimed professional (or personal) values, and the valued embodied in their professional decisions. That a discrepancy between espoused and enacted values exists, has been suggested by recent research (McNeil and St. Clair, 2005). I suggest that inviting such reflection can be considered action research in itself.

At this point of the argument, however, it seems important to present what I believe to be an interculturally valid justification for this strategy – which can only be implemented successfully through a skillful handling of culture-specific ways of communication, because both espoused and enacted values are part of living cultures. Inviting reflection on the relationship between “espoused” and “enacted” values aims at changing the attitudes of people in positions of power, without suggesting concrete ways of action – in the belief, that a change in attitude will influence all actions affected by this attitude, not just the one specific action one might have suggested.

What is relevant for our discussion are all “actions,” i.e. decisions concerning resource use. These may be concrete decisions allowing or disallowing a person or a group of persons access to .. grazing land, water, forest, mining, institutions of education, credit facilities, health care ... etc. etc.; they may also be decisions concerning laws or regulations for making such decisions at lower levels of bureaucratic hierarchy; or they may be decisions about the allocation of funds; or they may be decisions about the interpretation of local rules, never written down, and bearing on allowing or disallowing access to, or use of, or possession of resources.

In different places and cultures there are obviously different positions which invest the position holder with the power to make such decisions. What is important is that they exist virtually everywhere, and virtually everywhere the exercising of this decision-making function is – in part at least – seen as a regulating service to the rest of the community, tribe, region, nation ... a service in safeguarding rules of access and embedded notions of justice, a service which also deserves to be rewarded.

It is not surprising, then, that different local people from different continents – i.e. in Uganda, in Namibia, and in Indonesia – mentioned that a “good” leader should be honest, should be “exemplary,” etc.: while this is not his – or, more rarely, her – only function, s/he is virtually everywhere in a position to balance the interests of individuals and groups against each other. Not always can this balancing satisfy everyone concerned equally well – and this is precisely where notions of justice become crucial: because they provide a standard which allows people to accept feelings of

dissatisfaction or even hurt with a certain equanimity, because, in their eyes, there will still be a balance at some “higher level.”

Only modern society entrusts the balancing of individual self-interest almost entirely to the impersonal institution of the free market, which is supposed to ensure that, the more determined the pursuit of self-interest, the greater the resultant common good. That, at least, is what we hear from some of the defenders of economic liberalisation.

It is important to note that the balancing act between the self-interest of different individuals and groups, or between individuals, groups, and some notion of a “common good”, is a general function of positions of authority and leadership. This balancing act always requires some kind of a personal decision – a decision which may be justified by reference to rules, but in fact depends more on an intuition, or a sense of justice – even in highly bureaucratic settings, and to some extent even in modern business. Acting on this intuition is what was called “enacted value” above, while the rules adduced to justify this decision when talking to other people were labelled “espoused values.”

Making decisions in positions of authority or power always entails juggling between “enacted” and “espoused” values. Because of the visibility of such decisions, they need to be justified in terms of the values “espoused” by others, usually the majority.

This also applies to the balance between the self-interest of the decision maker, and the reward for the balancing function. As a former Indonesian *Kepala Desa* (village mayor) put it: “People know that you incur expenses in your office. Everyday you have visitors whom you have to entertain. So you should get a certain part of the fees you collect. But when the major portion enters your pocket, something is wrong and you are not a good leader. Unfortunately, most leaders are like this nowadays.”

Sometimes, the expectation is higher: In the Nakasongola District of Uganda, a good leader is expected to be “trustworthy.” “Trustworthiness” here means: “Let’s say you have agreed to buy office furniture for 25.000 Shilling. Then the leader goes to buy the furniture, and finds that it only costs 20.000 Shilling. A trustworthy leader brings back the balance.”

In modern terms, this is called “accountability.” Accountability had been included among the basic principles for the co-operation between the different village institutions and the role of these bodies to serve the welfare of the village populace in the Indonesian village referred to earlier. These principles – which also included “transparency,” “democracy,” and “participation” – had been written into a sort of manifesto which had been agreed upon in a big village meeting in 2002. Unfortunately, people in this village are beginning to realize that the rhetoric does not match the reality. The very same persons whose words were “so sweet to hear” – because they promised something new – are now found sadly missing in following their own principles.

Silently, some people had realised long ago that external grants usually benefited the village elite only. But now the arrival of a substantial grant from a foreign funder, publicly announced, raised hopes that it would be handled in a transparent manner. This time it would be different. But none of the suggestions for improving the economic lot

of the “common people” was taken up, while the usefulness of the visible results – such as buying a computer and video equipment, and inviting an NGO to provide training for its use – seemed questionable. At the same time, the funds were not accounted for. Although – in the minds of the members of the elected village council – they had been obtained “in the name of the people.”

Can an unbalanced state of affairs be sustainable?

The discrepancy between “espoused values” and “enacted values” may not always be as obvious as in this case. But a discrepancy between the characteristics of a “good leader” and the perceived characteristics of the majority of actual leaders appeared the norm under the rather different ecological conditions of the Nakasongola District in Uganda, the Omatjette Communal Area in Namibia, and the villages around the Lore Lindu National Park in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

The number of cases may be too small to draw general conclusions – and I concede that our colleagues who insist on the “representativeness” of samples have a point. Yet I do not believe we need more instances to “prove the point.” These cases are clear and, moreover, they are at least likely to be representative - because the actors follow a similar “logic of action”: the decision-making power invested in the office itself, and interference from outside the local “system” provide opportunities for personal gain beyond what could be made available within the local system itself – but often still below what position holders closer to the centers of political and economic power can sometimes claim as regular remuneration for their services. Local decision-makers are in a position to easily divert parts of the funds for their own benefit or direct them in ways indirectly beneficial to them. This, however, violates notions of justice. Although sometimes, if not often, the offended sense of justice is hidden behind polite smiles and appreciative words for the office-bearers.

Because of the discrepancy between espoused and enacted values being so widespread, if not outright unavoidable, I tend to see moral indignancy about this state of affairs as an understandable, yet counterproductive attitude. Instead, it seems more fruitful to think through the consequences of such an imbalance between personal or self-interest and the “common good” for sustainability – for the sustainability of offices, of institutions, and of ways of life – and to explain to the decision-makers concerned these consequences resulting from mechanisms of interaction. In fact, at the global level, the achievement of distributional justice between “North” and “South” is beginning to be seen as a precondition for the achievement of the “intergenerational justice” which is taken as a measure of sustainability.

To my mind, it is the same cold “logic of action” which ensures the unsustainability of “systems out of balance.” The logic described above applies to all levels and places. It simply refers to the ease of obtaining personal benefits as a result of holding a position where decisions about resource-use are made habitually and routinely. To “tweak” these decisions in one’s personal (or group’s, or organization’s) favour is not a prerogative of the “South”, even though general scarcity increases the temptation and makes restraint harder: these days, you just have to mention the name “Enron” to make this clear.

The centerpiece of the mechanism leading to the decay of systems out of balance is not in the logic of action described above, not in the disbalance created by a diversion of resources to particularistic (i.e. individual and egoistic) ends. The crucial negative impact is delivered by the logic of action developing in reaction to it. It follows the pattern described by a member of the village elite in the Indonesian village itself: “As we see that the funds are not benefiting the people, we will encourage them to break the rules and go back to open up forest land within the national park, to cut down trees, to collect forest produce.”

On close inspection, three mechanisms of reaction can be detected. First, abuse of privilege encourages abuse at lower levels of decision-making hierarchies: prosecution of offenses is more difficult once the prosecuting officer stands to be accused of the same offense if s/he goes ahead with the prosecution. Second, perceived injustice either prevents the building of trust or destroys existing trust (for more on trust, see Govier, 1997, 1998; and James, n.d.). To the extent that trust involves a certain predisposition for “risky” investments (emotional and material ones), erosion of trust will decrease investments – investments which might be necessary for the sake of sustainability. Third, it will be even harder to request any sacrifices in the name of the “common good” than it already is when the leader is trusted. Yet, under conditions of increasing scarcity at least of natural resources, due to a population increase which has in recent years not been offset by matching increases in agricultural or biosystem productivity, individual restraints or cut-backs in the consumption of natural resources are unavoidable.

Taken together, violation of principles of justice in positions of decision-making power will in the long run endanger not only the overall sustainability of the “livelihoods” of the system concerned, it will also, more or less directly, endanger institutional sustainability - the continuation of the office itself or the continuation of the incumbent in this office. Tipping the balance too far in the direction of self-interest might even result in court sentences, as ultimately in the case of Enron (Roaychoudhuri, May 26, 2006). This result, however, is not unavoidable: it depends on the decisions taken by the incumbents in positions of power.

Conclusion: The effectiveness of the courage to be open

In the Indonesian village, I found virtual unanimity among the people I talked to on one point: it would still be possible to (re)build a trusting and forward-looking relationship amongst different leaders, and between leaders and the *masyarakat* (the people), despite the suspicions which had already crept in – provided the leaders returned to being open and transparent. I see a parallel between these common sense local conclusions and Elsbach’s report that managers achieve trust – among others – by maintaining open communication and behaving consistently (Elsbach 2004). Consistent behaviour and openness are part of sincerity – which Bordum (2005, p. 26) sees as “a pragmatic condition for the creation of trust,” a condition which he sees as important for business communication und business success.

Openness and consistency of behaviour, or, in short, sincerity, are different names for the congruence between espoused values and enacted values which had been found

lacking in international development organizations (McNeil and St.Clair 2005), as well as in local contexts (as stressed by my “informants”). It is indeed difficult to be open and sincere once you have violated your own sense of the balance between personal or self-interest and others’ (or “common”) interests. This applies not only to office holders in organizations, it also applies to researchers.

Seeking to establish trustful relationships as basis for trustworthy – or “valid” – results does seem to require some courage in being open about the aims of the research, and some other things people are interested in. It requires becoming vulnerable – at least to criticism concerning the aims and results of the research, as well as the personal behaviour of the researcher. Attempting to encourage reflection on discrepancies between “espoused” and “enacted” values may also result in decisions not to support further research: giving feedback on widespread suspicions in the village to members of the elite in the form a brief report – which reminded of the earlier agreed-on principles and stressed the favoured option of openness – first lead to promises that the researcher would be invited for a planned village meeting to rebuild openness. Some time later, a fax arrived, asking the researcher not to come back to the village, because his research had focused too much on “weaknesses” of the village and might lead to conflict in the village.

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