

## **Social Imagination**

Democracy, Sustainability and Participatory Learning

Nielsen, Birger Steen

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## **Social Imagination**

### **Democracy, Sustainability and Participatory Learning**

*Birger Steen Nielsen, Roskilde University, Denmark*

#### ***Introductory remarks***

In this paper I will give a short presentation of themes and concepts which are at the core of the part of my work which relates to “lifelong learning”. Thus the paper should be considered a background for my lecture at the conference where I shall develop some of the points further. In my professional work I have – throughout 30 years – been dealing with questions of “lifelong learning”, most of the time, however, conceptualized in other terms. About ten years ago we established a “Graduate School in Lifelong Learning” at my department at Roskilde University which I have been attached to since then. This naming was a bit ambivalent as to that time the very term “lifelong learning” was already ambiguous. The idea of creating the possibility of “learning” and “developing” throughout the whole life as well as the idea of a working life where these qualities should be inherent – and that is: a possibility for *all* people, not only a privileged “elite” – these were ideas related to a progressive tradition, linked to parts of the trade union movement and to the new left which was my own experiential background. And Roskilde University had as a reform university founded in the 1970ies a part in this tradition too.

At the same time, however, the concept of lifelong learning was already at this time being inscribed into other strategic agendas (for instance becoming an official EU-ideology) and thus being transformed or, if you like, colonized. In the last decade this tendency has obviously prevailed. Linked to labor market and organizational demands of flexibility and an everlasting, restless competence development lifelong learning is turned upside down. So we have to reconsider our engagement with the concept, theoretically as well as practically. You wouldn't necessary have to drop the concept (the replacement of categories is in itself no guarantee for substantial change and might even obscure the real problems), but at least to be (more) precise on your use of it. In my

own work the question of lifelong learning has been narrowly connected to endeavors to create a specific kind of action research which we call “democratic action research” or – in a theoretical mode – “critical utopian action research”. I have been engaged into this work together with some friends and colleagues, so it’s a collective or collaborative work, hence the “we” in the text when I refer to this work.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Urgent agendas in the present historical situation***

Today there is no neutral or innocent way of speaking and dealing with lifelong learning. The concept itself does not any longer carry an index of personal liberation and growth nor of equality and social possibilities. If you want to relate the concept to such perspectives (as at least in a Scandinavian context it once was) you have to relate it to societal key questions. In the work and projects which I have been involved in we have tried to give an answer to this challenge by making the questions of *sustainability and democracy*, seen as internally combined and even mutually dependent moments, the horizon for the learning processes. At the same time you should underline that establishing such a horizon for the learning not only affects the goals or contents of the learning processes, but their forms and settings as well.

The programmatic emphasizing of sustainability and democracy as the horizon for learning processes implies that the question of *responsibility* for the impacts of your actions and choices will eventually appear as the pivot of the learning that therefore will have the character or at least the potential of a *participatory learning* – in one way or the other. In fact, the refusal to make an account of the impacts of your actions (including your way of living) is the strongest resistance to learning understood as the working through your experiences, thus *making them new* – contrary to learning within a narrow, pragmatic, perhaps organizational horizon (“the development of competencies”) where it is taken as a more instrumental reorganization and “innovation” or maybe even replacement of your understandings, orientations and values. Of course concepts like

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to our action research approach, see: Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen: Methodologies in Action Research in: Nielsen & Svensson, eds.: *Action and Interactive Research*, Shaker Publishing, Maastricht 2006. Dimensions of one of our major projects, “Industry and Happiness” from the early ‘90ies are described in English in: Nielsen, Nielsen & Olsén: Industry and Happiness, in: Olesen & Rasmussen, eds.: *Theoretical Issues in Adult Education. Danish Research and Experiences*, Roskilde University Press 1996; Nielsen, Olsén & Nielsen: From Silent to Talkative Participants, in: *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 17, Nr. 3, 1996; Nielsen, Nielsen & Olsén: Sustainability and Industrial Democracy, in: Köhn, Gowdy & van der Straaten, eds.: *Sustainability in Action*, Edgar Elgar, Cheltenham 2001.

sustainability and participatory learning could be – and in fact have been – said to imply the same contradictions or ambiguities as lifelong learning, so these concepts too have to be carefully specified and dealt with.

Making sustainability and democracy the (potential) horizon for lifelong learning implies that the learning processes – limited, specific, local and contextual as they will always be – are recognized as part of a broader societal or even universal unity which is a dimension that is most likely to be ignored. The point here is not only and foremost that those people (professional educators, pedagogues, researchers, community workers, consultants, NGO representatives and so on) that might have the responsibility for initiating and organizing of learning processes or settings should be aware of this broader imbedding, but that it should emerge as an inherent dimension of the learning itself. I think this is a key point – and certainly not one that is easily dealt with! It puts quite different challenges to learning processes (and thus requires different practical answers how to meet these challenges) if taking place in institutional learning settings, in corporal or organizational settings or for instance in a local community context.

The arguments for considering *sustainability* an urgent agenda with both societal and personal implications for our way of life and life conduct may be obvious, although they could be put in very different ways that point into quite different directions. The combination of sustainability with the demand of a renewal of democracy, however, pinpoints the issue as a question of a societal renewal based on the possibility and will of “ordinary people” taking responsibility of common affairs, including the (ways of) production and regulation of for instance nature protection – these being issues related to my own work. A counter position to this would be a concept of sustainability based primarily on the expansion of the influence of expert cultures on policy making. This counter position is not in absolute terms against the “involvement” of lay people, quite the contrary. Thus a specific kind of participatory learning plays a prominent role within actual postmodern governance strategies. They address the involvement of citizens (in relation to nature management for instance) or “users” (in relation not only to commodity production but to welfare institutions such as for instance hospitals or day care as well: “user driven innovation”) in policy making, but not as a way to strengthen a democratic influence and responsibility. Rather, these governance strategies are undermining a public democratic decision making.

What I have lined up here is a critique of a neo liberal agenda that has achieved a dominant if not hegemonic position – although it might now be in a crisis. Its influence on learning

theory has been strong and much more penetrating than often realized, first and foremost related to the dissemination of management concepts. Looking for alternatives to this agenda, different concepts could be of help. Some 60 years ago Karl Polanyi (in *The Great Transformation*) presented his critique of capitalism as a *disembedding* process, a critique that could be seen as counter position to von Hayeks contemporary neoliberal treatise *The Road to Serfdom*.

Disembedding means that the economic dimension of social life is separated from the rest of this life thus gaining an autonomy following its own strictly market and profit oriented logic which ends up dominating all other social, human and natural logics and concerns. In this process these other logics are made invisible and are not recognized in their implications for the societal “economy” as a whole. Neo-liberalism is disembedding as an absolute programme. The alternative: *re-embedding*.

What re-embedding could mean to day, however, is not easy to say. It is certainly not returning to a pre-capitalist order. It has to be (re-)invented. Polanyie’s own suggestions (sketched at the end of the Second World War) are not sufficient to day. They would point more into the direction of traditional social democratic efforts that for long have been in a crisis. Today, among other things endeavours of de-commodification of central societal activities and areas would constitute important steps towards a re-embedding. As an alternative to the neo-liberal strategy that seeks to transform everything into commodity based activities, the concepts of *commons* should be renewed.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe the radicalism of the concept of dis- and re-embedding is more obvious today (even more than Polanyie himself may have realized) regarding the sustainability crisis. At least that is what we have been thinking, reflecting on the achievements and unsolved difficulties that we have seen in our projects throughout the last three decades. Relating our endeavours to the idea of re-embedding as a *societal* perspective or horizon for (lifelong) learning processes gives us an important possibility of conceptualising the societal dimension as *intrinsic* to the learning processes themselves. Re-embedding taken in a radical meaning is necessarily to be thought of as something that must develop as an *integral part of everyday life*. Everyday life – understood in the tradition from the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre – includes our working life and our public life as well, and people’s autonomous shaping of their everyday life through different forms of collaboration marks the starting as well as the returning point of learning processes that could function as the pivot both of a beginning re-embedding and of personal development (combining knowledge and maturity in the sense of the enlightenment tradition’s “Bildung”).

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<sup>2</sup> See: Vandana Shiva: *Earth Democracy*, Zed Books, London 2006

Everyday life in our societies, however, could not be considered a solid base for learning processes that we could rely on just like that. What you might call the inner side of the disembedding is what the German sociologist and philosopher Oskar Negt has called the *erosion* of everyday life. At the very centre of this erosion stands the fact that we are prevented from taking responsibility for our part in the productive and public life of society. We are only wanted and relevant as labour (work force), consumers and periodical voters. Our everyday life tends to appear unchangeable, dominated by a “realistic” horizon that could not be transcended. This reduction corresponds with maybe imperceptible, but never the less wide ranging changes of the very structure of everyday life itself – such as for instance the disappearance of transitional spaces and self constituted rhythms. Learning processes in the sense here roughly sketched will have to re-shape and somehow “institutionalize” such qualities a new. Thus their (utopian) horizon would be a transformation of everyday life itself.

Among the many concepts of learning circulating today is also the concept of “social learning”. This concept has, ironically you might say, in certain contexts functioned as legitimizing a pragmatic narrowing of the learning agenda to the specific “social context” in question, thus reducing the notion of “social” into a mere formal meaning while at the same time stripping it from its substantial meaning of “being social” or “behaving socially”.<sup>3</sup> The learning that we have in mind, however, would be a social learning in the full meaning of the word. I emphasize this because I consider the actual historical situation as an open situation where new *practical* (learning) agendas are needed, but establishing them includes a debate or maybe even fight on discourses and concepts, on what you are able and allowed to think and imagine.

So, a new societal agenda focusing on sustainability and democratization is also a permanent learning agenda, lifelong if you want. But we should be careful not to consider societal change a pedagogical process. People learn while trying to renew society and everyday life, but they come together in order to do *this* – not in order to go through learning processes. People change while learning, but they should not learn in order to change. What they must do if such a renewal shall take place, is to develop or unfold their *social imagination*. Learning is inherent to the unfolding of social imagination, but social imagination as a creative process is something else and more than learning. While the well known notion of “sociological imagination” (Wright Mills) is related to forming a critical intellectual knowledge, “social imagination” is related to forming ideas,

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<sup>3</sup> This goes for instance for Etienne Wengers much noticed concept of *communities of practice*.

sketches, visions of “how to live”, it is critical but at the same time utopian, it’s basic medium being that of aesthetic imagining.

### ***Participatory learning within the framework of democratic action research***

As mentioned above, my own work with these questions is intertwined with endeavors to develop a kind of action research that could encourage and support transformative processes based on social imagination. Together with some colleagues I have tried to find answers to the question: How could research be part of societal transformative processes? Which does not mean that transformative processes must be based on research! Research certainly has an important, but also modest role to play, but I will not in this paper go further into this and discuss our action research approach as a specific *research* question, but concentrate on a discussion of it as a learning approach.

We have been working with (action research) projects on democratization and sustainability (although we have not always used that term) in different societal contexts. Below I will present an example from one of these contexts concerning *democratic nature management*. (In my lecture at the conference I may discuss examples from the area of industrial production and childcare). The concepts so briefly sketched above, including the understandings of learning, have developed throughout this work and are still to be considered as open-ended, experimental concepts. Keeping this in mind, our approach, however, could be condensed into a kind of model that could be sketched as follows.

In the model democracy is taken *both as a goal and a medium*. This is decisive. Steps to democratization could not be taken without trying practically to *anticipate* democracy in this process itself. This should penetrate all the (learning) processes, thus radicalizing the idea of “participatory learning”. In order to create a space where social imagination could emerge we try to establish a *utopian horizon*, that is a horizon within which the questions and dreams that cannot be asked and allowed in everyday life could get a chance. Or, put in another way: where the latent dimensions of our everyday experiences could be set free, these experiences thus getting the possibility of transcending themselves. This kind of encouraging requires a space that is at one and

the same time distanced from everyday life and bound to it (that is: “a transitional space”<sup>4</sup>).

Experimenting with this we have developed our model which consists of three steps.

First step: *Future creating workshops*.<sup>5</sup> In the future creating workshop you begin to put basic questions that you have more or less forgotten or given up to ask – or even think of. Thus the work in a future creating workshop is not some kind of “problem solving” (although you *do* confront problems), but rather based on or carried by the simple, but essential and existential question: “How do we want to live?” or: “How should we conduct our lives?” – related, of course, to the specific issue the workshop is dealing with. Supported by certain (technical) rules you go through three phases each of them focused on one one-sided angle: Critique – utopian drafts – projects, initiatives. The future creation workshop creates an atmosphere where the participants begin learning to listen to each other (and to themselves) and to accept ambiguities and ambivalences. This kind of workshop is fun to participate in and very good at developing collaboration on ideas and proposals of projects and initiatives. The ideas carry a utopian index, but are at the same time related to a practical, maybe experimental, perspective. They keep to an everyday life perspective and have a character of what we call “drafts how to live”.

Second step: *Research workshops*. The ideas sketched in the future creating workshop are first and foremost based on the participants’ everyday life experiences and knowledge. This is their strength – and limitation. The ideas roughly sketched in the future creating workshop need to be more carefully or systematically examined and worked through – hence the name: research workshop – and as an important part of this examining they need to be confronted with other kinds of knowledge, or put in another way: knowledge of another order than that of our everyday knowledge. In order to achieve this without subordinating the everyday knowledge to different kinds of expert or scholarly knowledge, we have developed the research workshop as a kind of social meeting between experts and lay people, encouraging a dialogue and mutual exchange between knowledge of different orders, also this guided by certain (technical) rules. The key point of this social meeting is turning the relation experts: lay people upside down, the experts being asked – or urged – to relating their professional knowledge to the ideas, projects and proposals by the lay people while all the time respecting their – somehow existential – character of “drafts how

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<sup>4</sup> We borrow this notion from psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, replacing it into our social learning context.

<sup>5</sup> We have adopted this idea from the late Austrian future researcher and all round activist Robert Jungk. His book on future creating workshops was first published in 1981, and I translated it into Danish in 1984. Recently an English version has been published.



to live”. To most experts this is a great challenge, but when they identify with the spirit of the research workshop very productive, creative and personally satisfying exchanges take place.

Through this second step the ideas and (project) proposals developed in the future creating workshop are strengthened and further developed. So they are better prepared for the practical returning into the everyday life in the form of projects and initiatives. But the function of the research workshop could not be reduced to such strengthening of the ideas. When it comes to a rich mutual exchange of these different kinds of knowledge – and the exchange could be rather limited or instrumental, one has to admit – the question of the relation of the local, contextual or specific practice and knowledge to a wider societal, global or universal context emerges. This marks the point where the question of both dependencies and consequences or impacts of your decisions and actions – your conduct of life, taken in a broad sense – is inevitably raised, and thus the core question of social learning: the question of one’s (relative) autonomy and responsibility comes in play.

Third step: *Dialogical public sphere arrangements*. The two first steps constitute the decisive medium or forum for the development of social imagination. You can say that they are located within a specific kind of protected or “free” spaces where it is possible to follow and try out also ideas that might turn out to have unwanted implications. This promotes the imagination, but might also establish a collective or “narcissistic” blindness to certain implications, although this would normally be addressed if not already in the future creating workshop then at least in the research workshop. But under all circumstances it is a necessary and integral dimension of a democratic and sustainable renewal of society that changes – projects and initiatives – should be presented and discussed publically. So, the third step of our model is the establishing of dialogical public sphere arrangements where the ideas and projects developed in the workshops are presented and discussed. Stressing the *dialogical* character of such arrangements we want to point out that a *renewal of public life* where the citizens transcend a position as a mere audience, is one of the most important issues in a renewal of democracy and of everyday life as well. Reducing *citizens* to audiences, residents or users is a key dimension of the erosion process (and a strategic dimension of neo liberalism) – and the development of “civility” a counter movement to that. So you might consider social learning and the development of civility as *one process*. – A fourth step that somehow could be said to fall outside our model, is of course the further life (realization) of the participants’ ideas, projects and initiatives – and for all participants their learning outcome of their participation that could not be reduced to the specific ideas and initiatives.

This model is just a model. It is characterized by a kind of progression (one step after the other) that also implies a specific logic, but the practical projects do not follow – or have to follow – this strictly. I will not go further into this here, but in the following give a short account of one of our projects, thus giving an example of who might participate in such a process and what the contents and the outcome of the work might be. The example could be seen as a kind of local community development and is related to the issue of the possibilities of developing a democratic (to a certain degree locally self regulated) nature management as an integral part of a broader social renewal of a smaller rural – and peripheral – area. We were three researchers taking part in the project.

### ***Steps towards re-embedding. An example***

The project started in the beginning of the present decade. You could say that it had its temporarily culmination in the period from 2002 up to 2005, but the activities are continuing even today although the “project” in a narrow sense is over. And likewise we ourselves as action researchers from outside have still ongoing practical relations to the citizens in the area. The location is a small rural community called *Halkær Ådal*. The community counts around 1000 citizens. The community gets its identity from a rare and beautiful landscape extending on both side of a stream (“Ådal” literally means: “Stream Valley”). The area is a combination of wetlands, agrarian cultivation from 20-25 farms, 4 small villages inhabited by citizens of which a majority are working in some smaller and one big town up to 25 miles away. The area was until a few years ago considered a declining or in fact dying rural community: the few local jobs decreased.

In the 1990s a small “green” group in the community tried to start a discussion how to make the area an “ecological experimental zone” and how to involve the community as a whole in this process. They defined (in collaboration with university researchers) a kind of program or total plan with detailed descriptions of everything necessary for the purpose. The plan had ideas and rules for farming and they had specified descriptions of biotopes to be protected etc. When they attempted to discuss the plan with other citizens in the community, however, they met ignorance and hostility; they were so to say marginalised in their attempt to open a discussion on sustainable development in the area. They were seen as “self-righteous leftists”.

I 2002 our research group took a contact to the small group of “green” activists and proposed a new beginning. We proposed them to collaborate with us on an action research project. Our proposal was to put *democratic values* in front and push the plan of an ecological experimental zone into the background. We proposed to invite the citizens of the area to take part in a future creating workshop. This was arranged in collaboration with all the local citizens’ associations, and the future creating workshop took place at a Saturday with 35 participants recruited among all kind of citizens in the community. Even a couple of the few – sceptical – farmers in the area participated. The headline of the workshop was *Nature and our local community in the future*. The headline was a result of a negotiation with representatives from the different citizens’ associations in the community, and it was a point that the question of nature management was tied to the question of the (social, economic and cultural) development of the local community as such.

The result of the future creating workshop was a wide range of ideas and projects.

Below I list the most important ideas for a sustainable future:

- New protection of wetlands – organised as a new commons
- A local democratic “board” consulting all ideas for economic innovations in the area
- Path systems and sailing routes on the stream – without developing into a tourist industry (but open to a controlled tourism)
- Local water supply and cleaning waste water – organised as a co-op
- A new kindergarten and a continuation school based on green values related to the region
- A local public forum responsible for democratic dialogue in the community
- Initiatives to create local “producer – user” networks
- School classes involved in monitoring environmental standard in the area
- Women’s network in the community
- Building new houses (available for ordinary people) in harmony with the nature of the area.

Behind each of these projects were a handful of people who had committed themselves to an ongoing work with their projects, making plans for their realization, and in the following time they went on with this work, integrating further citizens into the project groups. But the groups did not alone represent individual projects; they had also committed themselves to mutual collaboration and coordination. Every single project or idea was characterised by openness and unfinished goals.

Most of the ideas and projects had an ambivalent understanding of the future perspectives for the community as a whole. They shifted between a modernising orientation taking as well green values as a traditional idea of the necessity of “growth” and modernization into consideration. In a very open way the project groups kept looking for balanced solutions which were as well respectful to the ideas of a renewal of the local community through what we would call re-embedding activities, as to a concern about how to keep in touch with what could be called more modernistic developmental processes in society.

The decisive arena for the interchanges and collaboration between the different projects and for the free discussion on these “balance-questions” was a research workshop which was arranged as a follow up on the future creating workshop. The experts that took part in the research workshop were chosen by the project groups and the researcher group in common and made a differentiated group, representing many kinds of knowledge and functions. The research workshop strengthened the co-ordination of the singular projects and opened up for experimental activities which more decisively pointed towards re-embedding perspectives. All the ideas and projects – from the economic to the cultural and social – were put together and connected in a *local nature and development plan*. Obviously this plan as a whole could be seen as a draft to a kind of developmental logic alternative to the disembedding logic of modern and postmodern developmental dynamics, but certainly still a *developmental* logic. You could say that the plan expressed a concrete utopian horizon. But in contrast to the “green group’s” idea of transforming the area into an “ecological experimental zone”, this plan was not presented as a “dualistic” alternative to the citizens’ actual way of living, but as a possible way of moving into a direction of a more sustainable local community based on a stronger *democratic* involvement of (all) the local citizens. The core of the plan could be said to be this local democratic involvement and responsibility, but it is worth underlining that the ideas of the plan did not oppose a broader national – and even global – involvement. The participating citizens from Halkær Ådal realized that the question of nature protection (and local development too) could and should not be considered a question exclusively to be decided by the locals.

Few months after the research workshop all the ideas and plans were presented at a public arrangement for those community members who did not had taken part in the research project and for local politicians as well. The public arrangement functioned as a forum for involving new citizens in the activities and in the discussion on the future perspectives of the area. A

significant outcome of the project so far was that the hostile attitude to green changes and to local democratic involvement now seemed widely to have disappeared.

In the following years many of the elements in the plan have been put into existence, among others: new ecological buildings, path systems and sailing roots, a nature kindergarten, a women's network. The creation of new wetlands – with a big new lake at the centre – is the most impressive visible change. Returning public arrangements have been organized. The citizens in the area try to manage a democratic management of the process; they have organized in a “people's association” as a kind of umbrella organization for the existing local citizens' associations, and are continually in a dialogue with public authorities in order to draw attention to the locally developed plans and in order to obtain a more permanent authority in the change process. New projects have been made, for instance endeavours to re-establish the local inn as a cultural meeting place or the creating of better sports' facilities which is of great importance for the young people (to stay) in the area. Some citizens have for years now been trying to organize some kind of co-op related to locally produced goods (mostly agricultural), but it has been difficult.

One issue has turned out to be especially difficult, that of making the cooperative and *public discussion and planning* of the many different initiatives and ideas continuously working. The “people's association” has not really succeeded in transforming the planning which functioned when imbedded in the action research project, into some kind of new democratic institutional forum. And whereas the public authorities do have been helpful and collaborative in relation to singular projects they are not obliging in relation to this central question of widening out a local democracy. That goes for the practical managing of the new wetlands as well. There was collaboration on the establishing of the lake, but until now ideas of regulating it as a kind of commons have not been echoed by the authorities. Measured by the initial “nature and development plan” and the drive when the activities were at their highest you could very well talk about a decrease today. But measured by activities and the richness of ideas in comparable local communities Halkær Ådal could still be considered outstanding. And the same goes for the process taken as a continuous – if not (yet) lifelong – learning process where the involved citizens have been able in a new way to raise the simple, but fundamental question of how to live one's life – and to stick to it.

### ***Re-embedding and participatory learning: Difficulties, challenges***

If urgent historic agendas today could be defined as to find ways how to re-embed economy into society as a prerequisite for *and* a way to a sustainable transformation of society, then we have to ask ourselves whether and how different kinds of participatory learning could be part of such transformation. If this question is put to the kind of participatory learning (and action research) which I have briefly outlined in this paper and illustrated with the example of “Halkær Ådal” there will be no definitive answer to the question. The answers to be given would point to important qualities and limitations as well. Maybe this could be one starting point for discussing also the difficulties and challenges related to the broader concept of lifelong learning.

If I look at the experiences that I and my colleagues over the years have had with this kind of projects I would say that they in many cases have been very successful in regard to the development of social imagination and social learning. I think we have developed a model (and practice) where the ethos embedded in the “participatory” programmatic is not undermined by other hidden agendas. This way of working is good at producing ideas and project proposals and also at constituting project groups. It takes the everyday life experiences seriously and invites to transcending them too. It opens up for learning processes where the questions – and dilemmas – of personal and societal responsibility are brought in play. The dialogues between lay people and experts within the framework of the “research workshops” are, when they succeed, able to open up for a new quality of creating knowledge. It is fun and very satisfying for all parts to be involved. So far, so good.

But there are also difficulties and limitations. Some of them are related to the specific contexts of this kind of (action research) activities. They are vulnerable to contexts where for instance institutional, organizational or administrative logics set limitations to the horizon for what could be thought out and imagined. For instance we have experienced this in projects financed by trade unions or initiated by public authorities. It is not a question of a direct and explicit limiting of the agenda, but rather of (invisible) limitations of the horizon that the participants themselves accept. Often this is narrowly connected to the question of whether the participation is truly voluntary or not. These are examples of difficulties that you could try to tackle within a project, but not always overcome. They wouldn't necessarily damage the learning processes, but rather make them more traditional and divest them of their critical and utopian potential.

But there are also difficulties of another kind that exemplarily appear in what I called the decrease in the activities in Halkær Ådal. I think it would be a mistake to take that as a quasi natural phenomenon: after some years people get tired of making projects, of being very active and

turn back to more normal standards. This might be true for some, but misses the societal and political point of the problem. At the core of this decrease you could identify a kind of perplexity and maybe resignation growing out of the difficulties met when you have been trying to reach a more general or common level than that which is constituted by singular projects. Our present culture is in fact to a high degree a “project culture” and many projects (although definitely not all) have the possibility to get some financial and other kinds of support. But inherent in this project culture taken as a societal phenomenon – and this is what gives it its neo liberal flavour – is also a dislike, a systematic opposition to or even blocking of projects or initiatives that might transcend the mostly private or limited singular projects and substitute a merely entrepreneurial logic with a collective logic of democracy and commons. It is in itself difficult, while so unusual and against the dominating discourses in society, to constitute (project) groups dedicated to such common issues, so they are from the very beginning rather vulnerable. Many participants might think of such ideas that they are in themselves right and attractive, but probably unrealistic, even impossible to realize. And then, when you (too) many times have in fact met this blocking coming from authorities and regulations you might hesitate making a new attempt.

To summon up: An increase in self managed common activities, maybe in the first place at an experimental base, and the establishing of local democratic discussion and decision making arenas or “agoras”, *local democracy being in itself the most important commons*, would be necessary steps in transforming our society in a sustainable direction. This could not be done from above. But initiatives from below, as we have seen, are often reduced to singular projects or events, they have difficulties raising the more general – common, societal and universal – questions that are in fact inherent in the local questions, and when they none the less succeed in doing this they meet strong opposition from authorities and heavy structural and regulative hindrances. Sometimes this is discussed as a question of scale. That might in certain respects be a fruitful discussion, but it is not the small scale in itself that is a problem. Local or small initiatives need societal support and protection and are dependant of being part of a broader collaboration and interchange as well. You could say that it is a question of seeing the general or universal in the singular and local and of finding ways to establish commons and democratic forms of regulation that could match this unity.

Making this problematic thematic and finding practical ways to deal with it – this marks in my opinion a – maybe *the* – challenge for the (lifelong) learning agenda today (and for an action research agenda as well), at least if you – as proposed above – want to link the learning

question to the societal and political question of how to renew democracy and achieve sustainability, i.e. re-embedding the economy into society.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In relation to production and working life you meet these challenges as well, but in different constellations as is the case of nature management and community development. We have dealt with this in other projects and I shall address this in my lecture.