

Introduction to Gustavsen's "Action Research and the Problem of the Single Case"

Richard Ennals

In this new special issue of IJAR, which is concerned with "Building Bridges", we have the opportunity to clear up an enduring misunderstanding.

In Bjorn Gustavsen's native Norway, he is primarily remembered for designing and managing a series of national development programmes, each of which depended on collaboration between government and the labour market parties (employers' associations and trades unions), with an ongoing culture of dialogue. These national programmes had a declared foundation of Action Research, and the two became closely associated. Gustavsen (1938-1918) is remembered in a similar way in Sweden, where he designed and led the major national programme LOM, based on dialogue at several levels, and then led the evaluation of the Work Environment Fund (ALF). For many years, he held professorial posts both at the Work Research Institute (AFI) in Norway, and at the Swedish National Institute for Working Life (NIWL).

It may therefore seem odd for this special issue of IJAR in 2020 to focus attention on Gustavsen's 2003 paper on "Action Research and the Problem of the Single Case" (CAT 8.1. 2003). Here Gustavsen is responding to a paper by Davydd Greenwood (Greenwood 2002), whose approach to Action Research had been based on "single cases". Greenwood's paper had the mission of defending Action Research from criticisms from other methodologies, such as surveys. Gustavsen's response is robust: the other methodologies have often led to detached academic critiques, rather than engagement in action, as in the case of Action Research. Greenwood himself has been a consistent advocate of social and institutional change. A fresh and unapologetic approach to single cases is needed. If that fresh approach is recognised and understood, Gustavsen's place among the "Varieties of Action Research" can be illuminated, and the potential power and efficacy of Action Research can be appreciated.

In order to understand what Gustavsen is saying and doing in his paper, I suggest that we have to look beyond his work in Norway and Sweden. His national programmes were "waves", intended to stimulate social movements and bring about sustainable change. In his work elsewhere in Europe, he might be seen as an engaged Action Researcher, active at a

local level. He could be seen as “a particle”, rather than simply “making waves”. In this he provided illuminating examples for researchers on projects within national programmes. To be an Action Researcher is to be an “active particle”, whether in a project or a programme.

It must be acknowledged that the “Norwegian Model” of tripartite collaboration underpinned national programmes, as was formerly the case with the “Swedish Model”. The Swedish culture of Working Life has become more confrontational in recent years. The Norwegian dialogue continues to be more that of a family. The point is that each national culture is different, but that Gustavsen’s conceptual framework can be applied in each (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999). With a bottom-up approach to “concept-driven development”, Gustavsen talked about “productive partnerships”, “work organisation” within and between organisations, “development coalitions”, enterprise development and working life, and regional development.

Gustavsen argued that “there is no one best way”. He helped to develop the European Commission Green Paper in 1997 “Partnership for a New Organisation of Work”, for Allan Larsson, then Director-General for Employment and Social Policy. This Green Paper underpinned a set of policy initiatives and ongoing networks, such as the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN). Gustavsen saw “Europe as a Development Coalition”, a context in which we could “learn from differences”. As is outlined in Ennals and Gustavsen (1999), he organised a number of processes in which a series of international workshops brought together separate single cases. These cases were not presented with academic detachment, but by engaged researchers who had sought to bring about change. They described their cases against the background of other cases, and the descriptions became richer in each successive workshop. A shared language and conceptual framework developed to describe such cases. Researchers engaged in action were encouraged to draw on insights from researchers who had engaged in previous action.

Around the world today, for example in Latin America, Asia and Africa, we can see examples of focused approaches to development based on community mobilisation, rather than relying on the imposition of external expert-led solutions. Development workers and communities are encouraged to work on individual local single cases. I suggest that Bjorn Gustavsen’s 2003 paper “Action Research and the Problem of the Single Case” provides a “bridge” which can enable single community based cases to be linked, through action and dialogue, into an international movement. As Gustavsen argues in his paper, this is consistent with the approach taken by Freire and Fals Borda.

The “bridge” was there all the time. It can now be used.

About the author

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