

## Editorial

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This issue deals with the problem of learning, mainstreaming and development between work reform programmes over different generations.

For decades the field of state financed work life programmes has been characterized by a lot of open questions: Are the results and experiences transferred from one programme to the succeeding programme(s)? Are there opportunities for programme managing bodies to learn during the course of a programme? In which way are vertical and horizontal mainstreaming processes organized? Which are the barriers, the obstacles to such learning opportunities? Are there sufficient mainstreaming institutions built in the programme and which ones? Which are the conditions and possible transfer institutions to improve transfer and learning processes in horizontal and vertical directions?

More generally: Is there an ongoing discourse on workplace reform and labour politics between actors from different levels of society, say between local and regional networks, the social partners, politics on national and international levels, in other words: between the centre and the periphery? Where do the initiatives for work life programmes come from in society?

We are happy to assemble in this *International Journal of Action Research* issue a number of leading authors, who deal with these questions, based on their experiences both from work place development projects on regional and local levels, and from managing national work life programmes. Since 1996 Tuomo Alasoini has been the project manager of the Finnish workplace programme TYKES, which is now in its third generation; Robert Arnkil is an independent expert with outstanding expertise in research and evaluation of workplace development programmes, innovation policies and

dialogue methods in Finnish, Scandinavian and European contexts; Björn Gustavsen initiated, and was responsible for, a sequence of national work life programmes in Scandinavia since the 1980s (LOM in Sweden, ED 2000 and VC 2010 in Norway); Claudius Riegler is programme manager of work life programmes funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research and the European Social Fund.

If we ask ourselves where the initiatives for work reform programmes nowadays come from in society, we have to agree with Björn Gustavsen, who concludes his article saying: “With the withdrawal of most nation states from the field, and the failure of the European Union to follow up on its own Green Paper on work organization (Commission of the European Communities 1997), social-regional actors are what remain”.

From this perspective it is of special interest to have Thoralf U. Qvale’s outstanding success story of an action research process, built into and driving sustainable regional development over more than three decades, as a contribution to this issue. The Telemark regional development process is a strong example for a regional initiative in the field of work life reform, integrated into a successful strategy of regional industrial policy, which has clear implications for national policy contexts, too. It becomes obvious from Qvale’s report, however, that the success of the long lasting and still continuing regional development process in Telemark results from a special combination of support factors: The regional industrial management has a clear vision; there is by tradition a constructive relationship between the social partners, based on good personal relations between two key persons; and, last not least, the built-in action research process, lead by an experienced action researcher (Thoralf Qvale) was a strong and innovative driving force. It is worth reading Qvale’s instructive article, which is rich in empirical information, scientific experience and reflections on action research concepts, strategies and perspectives.

In the last article of this issue Berit Moltu tells “Satirical and Romantic Stories about Organizational Change”.

Back to the general topic of programme learning, impact, dissemination and evaluation: In my experience the learning process between programmes

is insufficient in different aspects and for different reasons. There are not sufficient discourse and learning opportunities within programmes for actors from local/regional networks with programme administration and politicians on national and (in EU programmes) on international level. Dissemination of results and experiences is very often doubtful and badly organized. In Germany we have examples from former humanization programmes which show that programme results and experiences, though documented in book series, have been forgotten to a great extent after the end of a programme. Evaluation reports, which came up with critical reflections or proposals for future programmes, which are not agreed upon by the funding ministries, have been suppressed (i.e. not published) (see p. 104) or simply been neglected by the public including social partners, politics, administration.

Researchers and programme administrators are very often aware of these deficits, and many a work life programme includes innovative instruments and procedures to improve the situation. The question however remains whether being aware of the problem and experimenting with strategies on programme level is sufficient to solve the problems of dissemination, learning within programmes and from programme generation to programme generation.

Robert Arnkil discusses in his article the development of the to date three generations of the Finnish work life programme TYKES since 1996, in its second and third generations clearly influenced by programme evaluations in which the author had a leading role (Arnkil et al. 2003, Arnkil 2004).<sup>1</sup> In addition to his programme evaluations Arnkil is engaged in a learning network project himself, called PEERS and financed by TYKES. This project is based on the idea “to enhance the learning spaces *during* the execution of the programme and to invest more in the permanent learning infrastructure between municipalities and municipalities and the R&D community” (p. 53). Arnkil develops several interesting and very concrete ideas to identify “the missing links in disseminating good practice”. Today it seems, he points out,

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<sup>1</sup> Different from the evaluation of the Swedish LOM programme (see Gustavsen, this issue, p. 21-23, 30) the Finnish evaluation was subject to discussion in Finland and had considerable impact on programme development from first to second and third TYKES generation (see table 1, p. 51)

“that understanding good practice and its ‘evidence’ are dominated more by a commodity-to-be-disseminated than practice-to-be disseminated concepts. This, coupled with a linear ‘cascading model’ seriously limits not only the possibility of good practice dissemination, but also what is perceived and recognized as good practice” (p. 59).

In his learning network project Arnkil practiced successful dissemination by what he calls “360-degrees” story telling. Every practice, he points out, “is embedded in a 360-degree context: there is a customer/citizen dimension, a horizontal networking and partnership dimension and a vertical management and governance dimension in every practice”. In order for an organization group A to understand, what successful implementing of the practice developed by B would mean ... “people from B could tell the people from A ‘how they did it’. Even more powerful in terms of learning is to have people from the *actual* 360 degrees (customers, partners, managers ...).” In Arnkil’s concept learning takes place in many small learning loops (everyday ‘real time learning’) and ...a big learning loop of strategic learning, typically more like a decade than less. “Do the decision makers wait for 10 years to be informed what choices to make? Of course not. They scour and sniff around, trying to find interesting ideas that *might* work ... It probably boils down to the question how rich is the everyday learning environment ... then, in the longer run, it becomes a question of how this tentative understanding of the practice is linked to the evidence of real impact, to the strategic ‘big loop’ of learning (all quotations from Arnkil, p. 54-56).

Of course, these small, everyday learning loops need support, a kind of assisting structure to be developed by learning network projects. Arnkil and his colleagues have critically investigated and observed materials, websites and forums of programmes and projects. They found out that telling about good practice is mostly very one dimensional... overly wordy and complex. This makes it extremely difficult for people from practices to approach the material, and become motivated to find out more. “The learning lesson ... seems to be that passive ‘good practice case-banks’ or information alone, sitting in the internet, is not a good practice dissemination, but coupled with some other components, could be. ... making the case banks active, and

offering facilitation, communication, help desks, problem solving and links to communities of practice would enhance the learning experience” (p. 57).

I understand these concrete ideas and proposals as a very convincing and necessary method to make the concept of disseminating learning experiences and development practices real. Arnkil calls his ideas “not a particular radical discovery or a suggestion to bridge gaps” (between knowing and doing, WF) (p. 56), but if implemented as a learning infrastructure into a research and development programme they would really make a difference. I tend to call it a remarkable innovation. For the first time it would make dissemination of development experiences and procedures to the public a task of research and development *programmes* themselves with considerable consequences for financial and personal resources.

In his consideration of how to build better programmes also Tuomo Alasoini emphasises the recently developed “learning network projects”. Compared to the traditional types of user oriented and method based projects these learning network projects are expected to produce “generative results” and to allow the actors of the networks “to improve their own development competence and to strengthen their own development systems by participating in discussions of the experiences of other actors” (p. 73). “The core process in learning network projects is bringing the experiences gained in micro-level development work by the various actors to common discussions in a variety of forums, resulting in the generation of new development measures” (p. 72).

This conception means a change of dissemination strategies. It is no longer a product, developed in a specific research or development context, that is to be transferred to other contexts (enterprises, firms, regions), but the idea is to spread learning and development processes into a growing number of new contexts. Instead of products (often called “best practices”) generative mechanisms are the logic of mainstreaming processes. The concept is convincing: The problem of mainstreaming is not to transfer a known solution (best practice) from a development context to further application in different contexts but to generate knowledge and development processes anew in new contexts.

The TYKES concept of learning network projects, however, is rather new; it will be interesting to see whether the programme manages to generate a sufficient number of “generative results” and discourses to initiate a process of new development measures in a variety of new environments (see also Gustavsen’s concept of generating social movements instead of trying to disseminate single case achievements, Gustavsen 2003).

We have however to face the fact that all these innovative procedures at a programme level, as presented by the authors in this issue, will fail if work life programmes are not enhanced and supported by labour policies on state and EU level and – as Gustavsen puts it – by a “coherent general discourse ... on the level of society”. The nation state is, according to Gustavsen, less and less able to organize broad public discourses, because (among others) “the centre and the workplace have become too far removed from each other for the centre to be able to exert meaningful influence” (p. 35).<sup>2</sup> Concerning this question Gustavsen is both sceptical and optimistic. He is optimistic insofar as he sees a growing number and strength of regional networks successively incorporating other actors such as “representatives from regional administration and politics, research and education, and more” (p. 35). I agree. The declining role of the centre and the growing importance, not only of regions and regional networks, but also of social movements “that constitute the discursive spearhead in areas like democracy, humanism, equalisation between sexes, ecology and climate ...” (p. 36) is a strong argument, revealing a major tendency and characteristic of our contemporary societies, not only in the field of work place reform and labour politics.

It is however an open question, whether a growing number and strength of local and regional networks will one day result in a broad discourse on labour politics and work place reform, as Gustavsen seems to expect. A constellation

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<sup>2</sup> Gustavsen discusses this tendency in the historical context of “the Scandinavian model” and its “claim to be able to unite actors from the state to the workplace in one coherent whole” (p. 35). However, the declining role of the state as organizer of broad public discourses on labour policy, work place reform or related topics is evident also in Germany as well as in all industrialized societies of the Western world. Gustavsen’s reflections are therefore valid beyond the Scandinavian context.

that might help to generate such a discourse on the level of society is a social partnership system as it existed in Scandinavia until the 1980s or a coalition of trade unions, employers associations and the Social Democratic Party on national level in Germany in the 1970s, which initiated and legitimized the work life research and action programme “Humanisierung des Arbeitslebens” (work life humanization) in 1975. This coalition however ended in 1980 with a conflict about attempts within the humanization programme to intensify and extend co-determination and democratic participation in industry. The employers argued that conflicts about improvement of working conditions and extension of co-determination in industry must not be financed by public funding. The end of this labour policy coalition stopped all attempts to enhance shop floor democratic participation within the humanization programme (Fricke 2003, 2004).

If broad political discourses on labour policy as well as the mainstreaming and learning capacities and resources built-in in work life programmes are missing, we face the situation as described by Claudius Riegler. “Public policy programmes in the field of working life reforms”, he concludes, “may be needed, but they cannot do more than supplement the genuine dynamics of working life” (p. 90) Like Gustavsen he emphasises the importance of establishing persistent development coalitions on local level, and he supports a recommendation of the European Work and Technology Consortium, of which he is a member, to create “a European public sphere of knowledge, capturing and distributing experiences from workplaces within an integrated process of collective and cumulative learning” (p. 98).

In general Riegler is rather sceptical about the possibilities of state financed programmes to enhance work life reform in a sustainable way. “There is a big gap between rhetoric and reality”, he states, “and positive changes often are not sustainable” (p. 99). The reasons are twofold: In a capitalist market economy it is not politics or the state that decide on the dynamics of working life and the economy.<sup>3</sup> Besides this fact the learning and mainstreaming capacities of work life programmes are insufficient in several

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<sup>3</sup> These are my words (WF); Riegler points to the (unequally distributed) “power relations in private and public organizations“ (p. 99)

aspects. Riegler reports on a series of attempts and suggestions to improve the mainstreaming capacities of the German work life programmes (p. 105 f., p. 109 f.). Especially interesting seems to me the recent implementation of so called meta projects, which try to develop mainstreaming strategies parallel to and in cooperation with ongoing research projects, among others in the field of preventive health and safety strategies in working life.

To sum up:

With the exception of Finland and to a certain (decreasing) extent perhaps Norway, state financed work life programmes are in danger of getting isolated from public discourses. Even worse: General discourses on labour policy and work life reform are more and more missing; this is certainly true for Germany and Sweden. On the other hand there are strong and successful regional networks flourishing in many countries, like the one in Telemark, which is reported in this issue.

On the other hand national work life programmes include many innovative concepts, recently, as the authors of this issue have impressively demonstrated, – in the field of learning within and from programmes. These achievements are at present developed or realized in all national work life programmes, which are discussed in this issue, and also in some EU programmes. A recent example is the EQUAL programme, which aimed at integrating discriminated groups (migrants, handicapped) into the labour market. In many European countries local and regional development partnerships (networks) were quite successful in creating and implementing innovative labour market procedures. In Germany, however, the official national labour market policy was not open to co-operation or discourse about experiences developed within the programme; there were exceptions at a local and regional level, but without influence on national labour market institutions and their strategies.

Many efforts are necessary in the future to improve the situation. We hope this *International Journal of Action Research* issue will make a contribution.

## References

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