

Engaging action research with urban planning practice in identifying new courses of action for sustainable urban development

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Abstract

New workable approaches to urban sustainability are often explored within temporary and interdisciplinary project structures located outside direct formal jurisdictional authority and every day planning practice. In this context multiple examples of cross-border collaboration can be identified where researchers engage with urban practitioners in knowledge production processes also popularly coined as modus 2 or action research. There is a great need for critical reflection on the methodologies applied in specific contexts of collaborative knowledge production in order to get a better understanding on how to arrive at actionable conceptions of urban sustainability. I take my point of departure in the Interreg project Urban Transition Øresund (2011-2014) involving urban planners from five municipalities and an interdisciplinary team of researchers from five research institutions all located in the Øresund region. The project has been set up with the ambition to develop models for collaboration and approaches to work more thoroughly with sustainability in urban planning processes. Based on my findings from being a research participant in the project I claim that action research can support the creation of inter-collegial spaces of social learning to discuss professional values, norms and challenges around sustainability. But what also has become apparent during the project is how the normative drive for enhancing democracy through collaborative knowledge production may be obscured by competing conceptions of participation based on the logics of the knowledge economy as well as they may be pervaded by internal conflicts of different knowledge interests among researchers and their partners.

1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that the urban scale represents an important governance arena for dealing with climate change as cities have a major impact on energy use, construction of buildings, waste and sewerage systems and transport infrastructure (Bulkeley, 2010; McCormick et al, 2013) By holding the formal authority to direct the physical development of the city urban planning definitely constitute an important field of action for a more sustainable development.

In a Scandinavian context many urban governments have for several years put forward visions for reductions in emissions and adaptations to climate change. Likewise visions of moving towards a more sustainable city have taken a prominent position on the urban agenda working as the collective name

for a broad range of policies. Within urban planning the practical experiences with integrating sustainability visions in new urban development and urban regeneration projects are still growing. Research and practice in the field note that in order to accomplish higher degrees of sustainability there is a need for an integrated planning approach for addressing social, economic and environmental challenges in ways that in the same time remains sensitive to the needs of particular urban areas (Holden, 2012; McCormick et al 2013). Though experience show that a significant gap between visions and practice still remains as visions are far from effectively integrated across policy areas as well as it remains unclear how planners and politicians can deal with the conflicts that may arise between social, ecological and economic interests (Stanojčić og Hermelin, 2013; Nilsson, 2007).

1.2 Action research and knowledge production on urban sustainability

In order to arrive at more operational conceptions of sustainability and work more thoroughly with it in urban planning it can easily be argued that different types of actions need to be explored and levels of agency to be activated. Within the institutional structures of the local government administration a wide range of professionals are employed with different dimensions of urban development ranging from ecological issues to citizens participation all relevant to further expand operational conceptions of sustainability. It is the scope of this research project to look into how the experiential knowledge of urban planners and their space of action ascribed to their professional practice can work as a platform for furthering a more sustainable urban development. More specifically this is explored within the framework of the cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary development project Urban Transition Øresund where urban planners and researchers have been working with different action research approaches.

New workable approaches to urban sustainability are often explored within temporary and interdisciplinary project structures located outside direct formal jurisdictional authority and every day planning practice (Bradbury, 2010; Laing et al, 2012). In this context multiple examples of cross-border collaboration can be identified where researchers engage with urban practitioners in knowledge production processes also popularly coined as modus 2 or action research (Trencher et al, 2013). Proponents of the modus 2 perspective claim that the collaboration between research and practice is necessary in order to contextualize knowledge production and link it more directly to changes in practice (Gibbons et al 1994). Critical stances within action research direct the attention to establishing alternative visions of sustainability to challenge the current systemic state of unsustainability (Nielsen and Nielsen 2006, Svensson et al 2009). This form of collaborative knowledge production in interactive research projects between practitioners and researchers still represents a relatively new phenomenon but experiences in the field are still growing (Svensson et al, 2009). My argument here is that there is a great need for critical reflection on the methodologies applied in specific contexts of collaborative knowledge production in order to evaluate to which degree that these ideals are actually achieved – or how they fail to be achieved. Towards this end I look into the differences of participants and how they try to deal with it, how the process of co-production is formed and point to impediments for forming more radical visions on sustainability.

1.3 Urban Transition Øresund

One of the many initiatives that have been set up to address the gap between the visions of sustainability and urban planning practice has been the project Urban Transition Øresund (2011-2014). The project that has been partly financed by EU's Interreg IV A Programme has involved five

municipalities¹ and five research institutions² across the Danish-Swedish border in the Oresund region. In the project an interdisciplinary team of urban planners and researchers have tried to identify new approaches and methods concerning ways of collaborating, organization of planning processes, building regulations and new forms of financing in urban planning. My Ph.D. has been partly funded by the project and the terms of my enrollment in the project has been to facilitate the ongoing process of knowledge production in the project together with a team of other researchers. Simultaneously and in a longer time perspective it has also been my role to follow the learning process of the collaboration between research and practice. During the project I have taken part in more than 50 meetings and workshops, conducted interviews with participants and held presentations. In this paper I will focus on just one of the working groups that explored new formats of collaborating on sustainable urban development.

The working group chose after some initial discussions to work with designing a sustainability board game as a way of building collaboration across different fields of knowledge and tasks among urban planners working in different administrative departments and achieve a broader understanding of sustainability in urban planning practice. The process of game development has been coordinated by two design researchers at Malmö Högskola and organized through a series of practical experiments and reflective workshops. In total more than 100 people took part in the experiments where as a smaller group of around 10 people have formed the core group.

The composition of participants in Urban Transition Øresund has been rather diverse spanning from those responsible for drawing up local district plans, representing either an architectural or social science background to social workers and communicators e.g. involved in urban renewal projects. In this sense they represent a typical case on how the roles and skills of urban planners are diversifying as they work with different tasks and within different organizational setups in urban development projects. This creates different frames for urban planners to organize and define specific actions for sustainability strategies.

1.4. Research interest

One of my initial motivations for engaging in the Urban Transition Øresund was that I saw this temporary and interdisciplinary organizational structure as a potential arena for social learning and collaborative reflection on working with urban sustainability (Nielsen & Nielsen 2006, Nolmark et al 2009). It has been my thesis that such an arena located outside the formal hierarchical structure of the urban administration could offer a reflexive space where urban planners with different professional backgrounds and working areas jointly could reflect on mapping the complexity and controversies involved in working with urban sustainability, entering into repeated cycles of experiments and reflection, which Schön has phrased ‘reflection on action’ (Schön, 1983). This was based on a thesis that when structuring problems and formulating visions participants can be stimulated to reflect on their everyday routines in order to reach a deeper understanding of the complexity of the problems at hand. Likewise an arena like this offers the opportunity to establish an inter-collegial space to discuss professional values and problems faced in everyday practice and to strengthen a common professional identity a quality that seems to be especially important when working within a volatile organizational structure as is the case of urban planning (Drewes, et al 2010).

Admittedly the project has not produced much tangible outcomes as I as well as the other project participants initially hoped for. This has confronted me with the troublesome question if we failed to

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Taking an overall glance at the planning systems of Sweden and Denmark many similarities can be identified in terms of national regulation and administration. National planning regulations in both countries are based on a system of hierarchy where the physical regulations in plans produced on lower levels represented by regions and municipalities cannot contradict national legislation. On the other hand there is also a tradition of relatively strong local autonomy of the municipalities. The municipalities holds sovereignty when it comes to formulating legally binding detailed regulations on functions, uses and design for delimited urban areas and thus these represent an important level of intervention if a more sustainable urban planning is to succeed.

Across the strait of Oresund the notion of the urban planner is expanding from being mostly centered on architects and engineers to encompass more diverse fields. Urban planning in Swedish and Danish municipalities is to an increasing extent characterized by intermediate/strategic forms of planning. Accordingly urban planning is not just exercised by drawing up local district plans but is also supplemented by informal plans and area-based urban revitalization programs that aim to shape urban development through dialogue and negotiation with different stakeholders. In this sense there has been a general movement away from setting fixed requirements supported by legal claims to a more open planning process. These open planning processes works as a way to discuss opportunities for development for specific urban areas with citizens, businesses and developers before deciding on a more formal framework. The traditionally professionally/sectorial based administrations have been partly replaced by new forms of organization where values such as efficiency and democracy compete with values of professionalism. The change of planning towards new forms of project based and strategic planning in dynamic interaction with external actors increase the demand of urban planners to collaborate with others within the urban administration across different sectors and fields of expertise as well as they must collaborate with politicians, citizens and other actors in order to find the best solutions for urban development.

2. Methodological considerations for action research

The methodological landscape of action research and dialogical research is rather pluralistic and with the existence of many modus 2 inspired development projects the methodologies and approaches applied concerns theoretical as well as practical aspects and interests. In a Scandinavian context two trends of thought have attained significant influence: 1) The pragmatic one based on the dialogical tradition and 2) the critical theoretical trend represented by critical utopian action research (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006). They differ in their conception of society and societal change, participation in knowledge production and learning (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006; Trencher, 2013). In terms of understanding processes of co-production with urban planners I find both schools of thought to offer critical insights into the hopes and controversies arising when new courses of action towards sustainable urban development are explored and discussed. Working with action research on sustainable urban development on the level of urban planners requires methodologies that look into both the systemic challenges to further a sustainability approach as well as relational and dialogical aspect of co-production among partners in the research project.

One of the core ideas of action research and participatory research is to include partners as co-researchers. The democratic ideal consists in that researchers as well as their partners exercise power and share the control of the research process. Action research is concerned with the double aim of sparking changes as well as establishing theoretical and methodological platforms for reflection (Nielsen, 2001; Egmose, 2011). Through my engagement in Urban Transition Øresund my methodologies therefore have been organized in order to contribute to knowledge creation in an

academic context as well as supporting the learning and knowledge creation processes with the urban planners in the project.

As pointed out by Svensson et al 2009 modus 2 inspired development projects often fail to address the shortcomings of demand oriented research dictated by short termed economic interests and demands on solutions that can be easily implemented. Instead they argue that transition processes towards sustainability requires a long term perspective involving a broader set of societal values (Svensson et al, 2009). This suggests a more radical view on learning that does not only seek to identify pragmatic solutions within existing structures but only inspire to critical reflection and rethinking of those structures. Critical utopian action research based on critical theory propose radical view social learning where the aim is to develop utopian visions for a sustainable future and focusing on *what should be* rather than what already exists (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006). In the process participants explore cracks in established social structures and practices and insofar they succeed to mobilize a greater public around their alternative visions opportunities to break with more unsustainable ways of acting.

The degree to which these ideals of democracy and participation are truly enacted in collaborative research projects remains debatable however as it also has been pointed out in much of the academic literature (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2012; Phillips, 2011; Kristiansen and Poulsen, 2014). Relations of power between researchers and practitioners have often been neglected issues in the action research methodology that is based on critical theory where power is defined in political and economic terms (Kristiansen and Poulsen, 2014). Further Phillips 2011 notes that it often causes problems if collaborative development projects are organized and carried out from the assumption that the participants share interests (Phillips, 2011). It has led some researchers to point to that the future challenge for collaborative research is to focus on how power, conflict and differences can be dealt with and pay a little less attention to similarities and consensus (Shdaimah and Stahl, 2012; Phillips and Kristiansen, 2012) This points to a need to work with methodologies that make the differences between participants more explicit. In the same way analyses co-production processes should aim to uncover the complexities of relations established between participants and between the different forms of knowledge that are expressed and represented in the project (Bradbury, 2010). As the conception of urban sustainability is a highly ambiguous field representing a wide range of policy actions and competing agendas it seem quite evident that we must move beyond the discursively agreed norm of today's urban planning and look into how urban planners ascribe different meanings to the sustainability concept and how they imagine possible actions towards this end. Cross-border collaborations can also make tensions that arise from working with sustainability in urban planning practice more visible.

Doing collaborative research it is essential to keep in mind that research and practice are oriented towards different outcomes (Laing et al, 2012). Researchers can hold a normative position but final decisions are taken in the context practice (Bradbury, 2010)

Even though the researchers form their research design in order to ensure a high degree of participation of their professional partners it is far from evident that the professional partners have the wish to participate from the same ideals as assumed by the researchers. For instance it might be the case that professional partners do not have the interest of being a co-researcher but simply just want their problems solved and orientate themselves toward solutions that they use directly in practice. For researchers this raises a dilemma in which sense they should challenge their professional partners way of conceiving problems and working with finding solutions to them based on their own research ideals of participation and co-production and in which way the researchers should seek to adjust their methods and the outcomes that are created to the knowledge ideals that are considered to be of particularly legitimate within the context of practice they are operating within (Phillips and Kristiansen, 2012). Phillips and Kristiansen conclude that the level of participation in collaborative

projects must be openly negotiated among the participants. Otherwise the researchers run the risk that they despite good intentions of involving the professional partners end up making participation an instrument of dominance and power and thereby marginalizing important sources of knowledge.

Olesen 2014 highlights how shifting economic and political priorities and transformations have changed the conditions on co-production of knowledge. She points out how the institutionalization of the neoliberal discourse on the knowledge economy have a significant impact on what goals and rationalities govern projects that builds on collaborative projects (Olesen, 2014). In this context it is relevant to explore how frequent organizational restructuring, complex relations, demands on efficiency and flexibility (e.g. Sennett, 1998) affect the way researchers and their professional partners conceive and engage in collaborative projects. The action research idea of initiating democratically run processes of change has to compete with other agendas of innovation, demands for efficiency and institutional reorganization that run parallel with the work in the collaborative projects. It also leads to critical reflections on in which sense knowledge production should be contextualized and how useful knowledge it is not only confined to a higher degree of external steering (Egmoose, 2011).

3. Methods

In this paper I exclusively focus on the process of the designing sustainability games even though the Urban Transition Øresund also consisted of other working groups. Consequently I only present the methods relevant for this process.

The process of designing a green game as a way to overcome problems with cross-sectoral collaboration on sustainable urban development was initiated around half a year after the project work had officially started. At that time the participants had started to express a certain frustration as they found it hard to find a common ground and drive the process forward. Additionally we as researchers were struggling to identify the urban planners in the municipalities who should be key participants and thereby make the specification of relevant sustainability issues to work on possible. On this background the two researchers holding the coordinative role managed to acquire additional funding to link a game consultancy company to the process. In the researchers view it was not the final game that was the most interesting but rather trying to develop a conceptual framework for understanding and communicating about complex systems. By involving the urban planners as co-designers it was the intention was that the process should help to highlight difficulties and dilemmas in planning practices and in the same time push the urban planners to make provisional decisions. The game designing was structured through a stepwise process where the participants experimented with different game mechanics to explore current models for organizing and setting up meetings with citizens as well as structuring cross departmental dialogue around planning issues. The principle of co-design implied that the urban planners was to be included in pointing out relevant issues, desired changes and in this way define the directions of future planning work on sustainable urban development. Additionally the urban planners were involved as co-constructors and evaluators of the experiments. While the urban planners and we as researchers agreed that it was needed to specify overall categories on how to understand urban sustainability the urban planners also pointed out that it was necessary to allow for adaptations to the particularities of individual cases. Accordingly each of the experiments involved the urban planners described the key considerations of the urban area to be developed.

Some of the experiments included:

- Providing input for further developing an overall plan for a large brown field development in a harbour area (North Harbour , Copenhagen) e.g. temporary uses of current infrastructures and facilities, urban space and greening
- Providing input for qualifying a developer proposal on a former railway area (Roskilde) e.g. green traffic solutions, reuse of historical buildings, cultural activities.
- Discussion on future initiatives for urban regeneration in a former hospital area to be a role model for green urban development (Segevång, Malmö) e.g. energy provision, urban gardening, use of public space
- Discussion on options to establish a local recycling centre as part of a new housing project (Västra Hamnen, Malmö)

While not holding the coordinative role in the process I have been engaged as a participant and observer in the practical experiments and reflective workshops. In this role I have discussed the experiments with the urban planners and other researchers and come up with my input to the design of the game. Along with this I have conducted individual interviews with 6 of the participating urban planners on their motivation for taking part in the process and their desired outcomes. Additionally I have facilitated an evaluation for 20 of the participants (urban planners and researchers) on how they have experienced the collaboration in the project.

4. Analysis

The project collaboration in Urban Transition Øresund early rendered visible that the urban planners had quite different conceptions of sustainability and how to operationalize it in urban planning projects. Likewise the fact that the municipalities had different conditions for planning for sustainability also hampered the process of identifying a common ground from which to work out guidelines for promoting sustainability in urban planning. For instance discussions in the group work and workshops pointed to how the municipalities operated under different legal frameworks regarding building code and well as they were to operate under different political priorities and administrative procedures in order to realize the vision of becoming more sustainable cities. These differences neither took the researchers nor the urban planners by utter surprise but merely demonstrated how sustainability remains a rather ambiguous concept. However the insights that the urban planners gained from each other's practices in the group discussions did cause many of them to abandon the initial project goal of formulating common guidelines for sustainability and standard methods to be applied. The discussion of different contexts and conditions for planning continued throughout the project. The evaluation of the project emphasized some variation in the perceptions of whether these more complex and nuanced views on sustainability in urban planning were valuable. Some of the urban planners expressed they found the complexity disengaging and regretted that the project had not provided them with a specific set of guidelines to use. Contrastingly others were of the opinion that the discussions had provided them with a more holistic view on sustainability crossing the confinements of their own work descriptions and professional competency. In tune with this some participants also expressed that the exchange of experiences had given them a better understanding of issues and processes important to translate sustainability visions into practice.

4.1. The dynamics of co-production

As mentioned earlier the game design process represented just one of the methodologies framing the co-production of knowledge in the project but will be one in which this analysis takes its point of departure. One of the virtues of the game design process was that it on the one side entailed a

combination of workshops with practical experiments in the setting of ongoing planning processes in which the urban planners were involved and on the other side where followed up by reflective workshops where the urban planners across the different municipalities collaboratively reflected on their experiences and challenges they saw when working with sustainability. None of the urban planners had any previous experience using games as ways to facilitate dialogues in planning processes. So their initial reactions were a mixture of curiousness to try out the method and timidity and skepticism on organizing meetings around a game design session inviting their colleagues, developers or citizens.

Different features of the process point to that an inter-collegial space for discussion of professional values centered on sustainability was in fact created. Several of the urban planners express content on the having a thorough debate on how to work with urban sustainability – an issue that they despite the political discourse found to receive stepmotherly treatment in daily planning practice. One of the urban planners found that playing the game with her co-workers served to establish ‘game community’ among them. Previously she had found it hard for the group to communicate and reach common decisions as the members represented different affiliations in the administration and thus different agendas. Using the game for framing the conversation the co-workers were forced to gain a better insight in each other’s view points and negotiate on possible solutions. Similar experiences were expressed at the reflection workshops where there seemed to be a common agreement among the urban planners that the game situation established a more informal framework of discussion. In this setting important and difficult questions were neutralized where each participant were forced to look at solutions holistically instead of orienting themselves achieving their own ends.

In the perspective of a dialogical orientations within action research the practical experiments and reflective workshops suggest that the project succeeded in establishing a framework of co-production where the urban planners were involved forming the content and issues that they saw as important to address in order to deal more effectively with sustainability in urban planning. Likewise it seemed to be a constructive framework for establishing a discussion on a complex issue and include different perspectives on working with sustainability.

Concerning the ambition of critical utopian action research to point to systemic challenges for urban planners to work with sustainability and work out utopian visions on how practice should be organized differently the outcome was ambiguous. In the reflective workshops the urban planners voiced critiques on how they experienced the economic priorities of their departments to hamper projects on e.g. green areas, temporary uses of existing buildings and citizen involvement. They also expressed the frustration that when they tried to come up with suggestions on how to translate the politically formulated visions into specific planning projects they often found that they would be turned down by their superiors or shifting political decisions. Despite this the urban planners were hesitant to formulate alternative visions to challenge these systemic defaults. The way the game was designed to facilitate common decision making might also have been counterproductive in the sense to explicitly work with systemic critiques. One of the urban planners also noted that the fact that the consideration of economic viability was included in the discussion of more sustainable solutions delimited the possibility of radical learning.

4.2. Tensions and research practice roles and relations

In Urban Transition Øresund much time were spend on trying to form a good dialogue and relations of mutuality between participants. Personally I experienced how the roles between the researchers and the urban planners were formed, negotiated and learned through the interaction of organizing the

activities in the working groups. A source of dispute was that we as researchers expected the urban planners to take more initiative point the directions they wanted to take the project and making sure that more of their colleagues were involved in the experimental workshops. Likewise we hoped that they subsequently would work on implement what they learned around new forms of collaborating on sustainable development – e.g. the sustainability game – in their respective organizations. At many of the reflective workshops however we often experienced the attendance to be low. Also despite the expressed enthusiasm about the game design format the urban planners remained hesitant to use this as a way to facilitate meeting situations. On the other hand many of the urban planners expressed that they found that the level of abstraction was too high and some found that we as researchers did not provide them with enough knowledge that they could apply more directly in their practice. In this sense the team of researchers faced what Phillips and Kristiansen, 2012 and others point out to be a paradox of participation where the urban planners were reluctant about acting in the roles of co-researchers. Transforming our roles as action researchers to present the urban planners with readymade solutions for strengthening sustainability in planning practice would not only thwart our professional competences as action researchers. It also raises a more crucial dilemma for the researcher on how to maintain a position to spark critical reflection and not merely pointing to pragmatic solutions within the systemic structures of urban planning practice as pointed out by e.g. Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006; Egmose, 2011; Svensson et al, 2009. During the project Urban Transition Øresund this issue of conflicting expectations to process and outcome were discussed at several meetings between the researchers and participants. To some degree the researchers engagement in practical experiments and continued reference to those in the subsequent reflection workshops seemed to establish a stronger relation of mutuality. Discussions on expectations and roles were highlighted by the urban planners as crucial in the evaluation of the project. Several of them had also told in the personal interviews that the project represented their first experience of working closely together with researchers.

Additionally it can be argued that the collaboration and knowledge production in Urban Transition Øresund were challenged by the organizational framework of the project and the conditions under which the urban planners could take part in the project. The interdisciplinary multi-actor collaboration between different municipalities and research institutions posed a challenging task for organizing the development work. Likewise frequent processes of reorganization and job rotations within the municipalities most likely impeded the establishment of more robust guidelines on how to work with sustainability in urban planning practice. This seem to support the point made by e.g. Olesen that the popular discourse of establishing participative processes with professional practitioners easily gets outcompeted by a neoliberal discourse of greater efficiency and willingness to adapt.

Conclusions

My argument has been that there is still a great need for critical reflection on the methodologies applied in specific contexts of collaborative knowledge production in order to evaluate to which degree that these ideals are actually achieved – or how they fail to be achieved. Working with action research on sustainable urban development on the level of urban planners requires methodologies that look into both the systemic challenges to further a sustainability approach as well as relational and dialogical aspect of co-production among partners in the research project. The project has been set up with the ambition to develop models for collaboration and approaches to work more thoroughly with sustainability in urban planning processes. Based on my findings from being a research participant in the project I claim that action research can support the creation of inter-collegial spaces of social learning to discuss professional values, norms and challenges around sustainability. But what also has become apparent during the process of designing a sustainability game is how the normative drive for

enhancing democracy through collaborative knowledge production may be obscured by competing conceptions of participation based on the logics of the knowledge economy as well as they may be pervaded by internal conflicts of different knowledge interests among researchers and their partners.

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