**BRIEF REPORT**

# When Successful Action Research is not Legitimized as Scientific Contribution by the Central Sponsors: How can Morten Levin's Three Pillars of Action Research Support the Arch of Research Collaboration between Large Public Organizations and Universities?

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**Abstract**
Morten Levin's work on Action Research (AR) clearly stated that the three pillars participation, action and research was equally important. During his long practice as an AR pioneer, he campaigned for the legitimacy of AR within academia. In this paper we investigate how AR is perceived as sound research within a large and distributed organization. We present a retrospective case study based on a research collaboration between UiT The Artic University of Norway (UiT) and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organization (NAV), that fostered an AR project together, 'Work inclusion, learning and innovation' (ALIN), but later led to the termination of the collaboration agreement. The ALIN project fulfils all the criteria for being a successful AR project in terms Levin's action, research and participation criteria. However, external audit and central NAV actors had different expectations of successful institutional research collaboration. Through our case we illustrate several conflict dimensions within the three AR pillars that must be challenged to strengthen the legitimacy of AR. The debate on rigour and relevance should not be limited to academic fields and include various actors and decision makers within large and distributed organizations.

**Keywords** Morten Levin · Action research · Legitimized knowledge · Research collaboration · Large and distributed organizations

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## Introduction

Morten Levin's uncompromising three pillars of action research (AR), participation, action and research, are forever lingered to former students and co-workers. His legacy is imprinted in our minds as well his publications: 'If any one of the three is absent, then the process is not AR' (Greenwood and Levin 1998b, p. 7). The combination of action and research was practiced by many, but not highly acknowledged by Levin unless the process had an explicit democratic objective (ibid.). And when challenged with the participation and action combination, he strongly argued that there was a fundamental difference between consultants (capitalists) and academics (idealists). Nonetheless, he admitted that the world of research and development represents a wide range of 'fake AR'. As Levin described AR as composed of a balance of research, participation, and action (ibid.) will the co-existence of the three elements be considered undoubtedly unambiguous and good?

This article presents a case study where we analyze documented reports and retrospective reflections from an AR project, 'Work inclusion, learning and innovation' (ALIN) (in Norwegian 'Arbeidsinkludering, læring og innovasjon i NAV'). ALIN was a project anchored in a research collaboration agreement between UiT The Artic University of Norway (UiT)and The Directorate of Labour and Welfare (Central NAV). While ALIN has been documented as successful in terms of participative knowledge creation, benefiting the service users and society and generating academic publications (Kane og Spjelkavik 2021 (red)), the collaboration agreement was terminated on the justification of lack of relevant research. We ask *how Morten Levin's three AR pillars action, research and participation serve as legitimized contributions in research collaborations in a large and distributed organization* such *as NAV*. By exploring the past experiences, outcomes of the ALIN project and the research collaboration agreement through Levin's AR pillars we present some conflict dimensions within the pillars that may explain why AR projects can lack legitimization in research collaborations, but we also address some challenges with Levin's AR theory. In conclusion we call for continuous effort to raise the validation of AR and to investigate how AR can be theoretically and practically deployed in large bureaucratic organizations.

## Theoretical background

Through his whole academic career Morten Levin crusaded for scientific quality, democratic learning processes and potential for societal change.

Action research comes in many variations. Faithfully in companionship with Davydd Greenwood, Levin built his theories as *pragmatic action research* (Greenwood and Levin 1998b) founded on the philosophy of John Dewey and work and legacies of Kurt Lewin, among many others akin. Science should be actionable, and knowledge should be built on the process of change. Thus, the essence of AR is when the knowledge users and researchers participate in the same knowledge generation process combining their diverse experiences, to experiment and share collective reflection over several iterations. Nonetheless, AR researchers should endeavour to secure scientific rigour as AR research challenges the belief of research as objective and non-interfering (Levin 2012).

Action research processes are not only participative in action but also aim to deliberate practitioners and enhance democracy. This is in clear alignment with the organization

development (OD) tradition, which opposes scientific management grounded development where experts design and control processes aimed towards optimal cost efficiency. The OD scholars are rather helpers than experts (Schein 1999) and act as *friendly outsiders* (Greenwood and Levin 1998a). Where the OD traditions has been criticized for being more attentive towards team level development (Burnes and Cooke 2012), Levin has also argued for system change on societal level (Greenwood and Levin 1998b). His work refers to the roots of the industrial democracy movement from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and incoporates ideas from Nordic work-life regulations and work culture. The importance of securing real participation not only as means to keep people happy, but to secure democracy and challenge societal power structures (Greenwood and Levin 1998b) is the very essence of Levin's practice and writing.

Levin was concerned with the role of academic professionals and universities in benefiting society. During his years as a professor, he trained hundreds of master and Ph.D. students in scientific reasoning. In Norway, AR has become a sustainable approach in the practice and discourse of knowledge development. He claimed that AR could support academic freedom and enhance higher education quality (Levin and Greenwood 2008). Consequently, we believe that Levin would approve of a collaboration of equals, a university and a public service provider to co-create new knowledge to improve societal welfare. Nonetheless, he warned against 'linear knowledge distribution' (Levin 2004) where universities produced knowledge that were transformed by an application process before being implemented as "new" practical applications. Furthermore, universities as knowledge producers on demand from clients was considered a neo-liberalistic idea that turned universities into '*industrial parks and venues for the development of the 'creative economy*' (Levin and Greenwood 2008, p 216).

Levin expressed concern towards gate-keeping agents in traditional organizations, commissioning knowledge production from academia which they later interpret and communicate or implement in their institutions (Levin 2004). We have found less in Levin's research to suggest answers to how this could be solved given organizational complexity and highly political messiness within large communities of practice. By deduction from the ideological stance of criticism towards hierarchical power and linear learning processes, that utilizing a dialectical and iterative approach in larger organizational systems would be preferable, both as change action and research methodology. There are examples of action research that have given examples on complex structures of various perspectives and interests from a bottom-up perspective e.g. Hynes et al. (2012). We have found less written problematizing or conflict resolution involving central decision makers, sponsors and actors from distributed units in participatory research processes.

Separated from organizational scholars, political theorists have written more on processes of central institutions approaching policy implementation towards bureaucratic layers and local governed service providers (Schofield 2001). Whereas previous traditional top-down approaches in this field have assumed a rational linearity from central policy making to local implementation, several authors have approached the field contributing with practical and theoretical knowledge on the complexity of these processes from bottom-up perspectives, describing implementation from local agents, addressing processual aspects as learning, power struggles and bureaucratic discretion (Hill and Hupe 2003; Schofield 2001). Scaling these processes in AR approaches might not be feasible, practical or methodical. Yet, Schofield (2001) calls for bridging understandings from both fields to approach the complexity, and we believe an insight in a case of central policy level research collaboration meeting local AR can bring forward a debate on how Levin's

**Table 1** Sources for empirical analysis

| Source for analysis | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Documents | 8 quoted documents (cooperation agreements, funding applications, funding allocation letters, termination of agreement). Minutes from steering group and other meetings. Notes from preparatory meetings have been reviewed |
| Recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded | 5 transcribed individual interviews with participations from Central NAV, NAV Troms and Finnmark, the UiT management |
| Notes | Weekly meetings for discussion and analysis of the retrospective narrative (authors, Jan-May 2024), informant validation meetings, various e-mails and calls to involved individuals to check historical information |



| 2014 | 2017 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| • Regional collaboration agreement between UiT and Regional NAV | • Seedfunding<br>• National agreement between UiT and Central NAV<br>• ALIN project commence its work | • ALIN project midway seminar | • Cooperation between Regional NAV and UiT about a National conference<br>• Final ALIN project conference<br>• National Collaboration agreement on hold | • Oslo economic report (OE)<br>• Alin project antology (Kane og Spjelkavik 2021 (red)) | • Central NAV terminates the National Collaboration agreement | • Collaboration agreement between Regional NAV and UiT signed |

**Fig. 1** Timeline

AR perspectives are challenged by central level research policies, and enhanced potentially providing a way to improve the legitimacy of AR in these types of research collaborations.

## Methods

This paper is based on a retrospective qualitative analysis of a process described in Fig. 1. The analysis draws on documents, interviews, and a process of documented reflection on self-appearance as summarized in Table 1. Data was collected and analysed from January to May 2024. Sources have been coded and thematically sorted through a stepwise deductive-inductive approach (Tjora 2018). The second order themes of the inductive analysis were sorted deductively according to Levin's three AR dimensions (see Table 2).

Qualitative organization studies on universities tend to put researchers in an insider dilemma of closeness and closure in a *self*-ethnographic approach (Alvesson 2003). Two of the authors were conducting a retrospective self-ethnographic reflection and are central actors in this narrative. One was dean until 2017, thereafter research coordinator in the agreement. Another was coordinator of collaboration with UiT in NAV first at local level, then regional. The third author provides an external view to the retrospective analysis but has experience of a similar situation as program manager in a research collaboration with Central NAV from another university.

While AR unavoidably involves subjective interpretations and interference with the community under study, AR within one's own organizations presents both challenges and advantages (Brannick and Coghlan 2007). The insights, emotional engagement and access

**Table 2** Findings in terms of the three pillars of AR

| Levin's AR dimensions | Conflict dimensions |
| --- | --- |
| Participation | Local versus central |
| | Direct versus indirect (individuals and among offices) |
| | Professional and organizational silos – who were involved? |
| | Research projects place in the organizational collaboration structure |
| Action (change) | Short term (emergent) versus long term (planned) goals |
| | Local versus general changes |
| | Rural (north) versus urban (south) needs and benefits |
| | Linear episodic versus iterative, continuous development |
| Research | Qualitative versus quantitative research |
| | Quality – who defines? Within academic and practitioner organizations, between academic and practitioner organizations |
| | Relevance – who defines? Within academic and practitioner organizations, between academic and practitioner organizations |
| | Social sciences versus natural sciences |
| | Dissemination: Professional books versus scientific publication |
| | What does participation and co-creation mean? |
| | Who defines the research question and when? |

to informants and documents were crucial to this study. However, a few informants were reluctant to share information with researchers they considered impartial, leading to processes of self-criticism and fighting personal indignation. Through reflexive processes (Brannick and Coghlan 2007; Alvesson 2003) and particular attention to informant validation we have strived to present our narrative and analysis in reliable manner.

# Findings

## The Organization Context

In 2005, the Norwegian welfare administration reform (NAV reform) was enacted by the Norwegian Parliament, merging three functionally divided sectors into one. The reform aimed to *'meet the challenges of both a strong sector and multi-level governance'* (Askim et al. 2010, p. 233). The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Directorate (Central NAV) compromises both state and municipal services, providing holistic services to ensure social and economic security and participation in work-life and social activities. Central NAV, centralized in the Norwegian capital Oslo, operates under the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion and is organised into eight departments, where one called "The Knowledge Department" provides statistics, research and knowledge and service development of the strategic areas for NAV's services and societal needs. NAV administers approximately a third of the state budget. There are 12 regional offices each led by a director, and a joint state and municipality partnership in each municipality, which brings together the responsibility for a joint front-line service, including employment-, insurance-, and social services. Approximately 15 500 are formally employed by the state and 6,500 in municipalities within the same organization (NAV.no 2024).

UiT is the northernmost university of the world, and it is a medium- sized multi-campus university spread throughout Northern Norway with 15,500 students and 3300 staff (UiT. no n.d).

In 2017 the Central NAV had signed three national cooperation agreements with universities including UiT. Currently, NAV has collaboration with five universities and colleges (NAV.no 2023). We have constructed the following narrative based on our document analysis and validated with key actors involved in the process. The timeline is illustrated in Fig. 1.

## From Local to Central Research Collaboration Agreement

The following narrative is constructed on basis of documents and interviews and illustrates how a local collaboration agreement emerged into a national agreement, and how the ALIN project became closely linked to the national collaboration agreement. The timeframe for establishing the collaboration spans three years from 2014 to 2017 (see Fig. 1), beginning in 2014 with a regional collaboration agreement between UiT and NAV Troms and Finnmark (Regional NAV). The agreement focused on research collaboration. This agreement was built on an earlier local collaboration between the Department of Child Welfare and Social Work (Department UiT) and four local NAV welfare offices (Local NAV). Central NAV granted UiT seed funding for the period 2017 − 2019 and a national collaboration agreement between UiT and Central NAV was signed in 2017 (see Fig. 1). The seed funding application from UiT included a research project on work inclusion and empowerment, with a goal to work towards increasing practice - based research competence about NAV at UiT. UiT decided to allocate the funding they had received from Central NAV to the ALIN project and organize the project under the steering structure of the UiT- Central NAV collaboration (see Fig. 1). While the formal agreement expired in 2020 with an option of three more years, ALIN proceeded with their research. including publishing results and experiences from ALIN in an anthology by Kane and Spjelkavik (2021; red). The decision of a renewed national agreement was postponed due to Covid-19, and UiT and Central NAV had no contact on steering level in 2021 and 2022. Our informants confirm that the termination of the collaboration decided by Central NAV in 2022 (see Fig. 1) came as a disappointing surprise on local members in NAV and UiT. The Regional NAV and UiT wanted to continue their collaboration and entered into an agreement in 2023. However, no governance structure of the collaboration has yet been organized (see Fig. 1).

In our retrospective conversations and analysis involving key actors, we identified two main mechanisms at play. Firstly, central management's involvement increased attention, legitimacy, and actual financial support. Secondly, central steering also disrupted the power balance between central and local actors and interests. With central support came requirements and expectations that could conflict with perspectives co-created from the established local collaboration. This is illustrated by one of the managers at UiT in retrospective reflection:

*'One problem with the collaboration agreement was how it was organized. [NAV Dir represented in the steering committee] was not in touch with regional or local services in NAV. It became challenging, what was AR based had no relevance to them.'*

## The Successful Action Research Project

During the first 18 months of the agreement period, the partners focused on the ALIN project which consisted of the five work packages: (1) Solution-oriented local welfare offices, (2) use of supported employment, (3) method development for work inclusion of youth, (4) the fast-track scheme (development of models for implementing the introduction program for refugees) and (5) innovation, learning and use of technology in NAV. The work packages were developed in close collaboration with researcher and representatives. The process was reported to the steering committee and communicated to a wider audience within NAV in a midway seminar (see Fig. 1). Progress and deliverables proceeded according to plan, receiving positive feedback from participants and audience.

In late 2020, UiT and Regional NAV organized a national digital conference (see Fig. 1) focused on learning collaboration and developing practice-oriented knowledge and methods for knowledge transfer. The ALIN project was evaluated as a success in the perspective of various stakeholders. Although the term "action research" had minor attention in the project, it can be characterized as an exemplary case of AR, aligning with Levin's three pillars:

**Research** Academic publications are often delayed compared to shared results among researchers and practitioners in practice and dissemination arenas. Nonetheless, they were indeed present. In 2021, the ALIN project published the anthology "Arbeidsinkludering, læring og innovasjon i NAV" (Kane og Spjelkavik 2021 (red)) (see Fig. 1). The book presents five research packages in eleven chapters by sixteen researchers. Each chapter includes reflections written by eleven participating practitioners from ALIN. In retrospect one of the researchers described the ALIN project as the "Jar of Sarepta", providing inspiration and material for several later publications. ALIN has been presented at various conferences, both for practitioners and researchers. As further proof, this current article resulted from authors sharing ideas after ALIN had been presented in conferences in 2021 and 2023.

**Participation** Both researchers and practitioners have emphasized the motivational aspect of being involved and working with relevant problems. They noted that building sound and safe relationships enhanced the discussions and outcomes of the processes. One of the practitioners involved expressed to us.

> *'In terms of our professional practice: It was super exiting to take part in this, and we worked surprisingly well with both students and researchers. (…) There were few barriers in discussing things among us.'*

Nonetheless, they reflected further that bringing topics up within the system or involving colleagues or neighbour offices in the new knowledge was harder because these had not directly participated in the same process. The success in terms of participation in ALIN is characterized by direct involvement, tailor-made solutions, and personal relationships in collaboration.

**Action** ALIN also led to new actionable knowledge. There have been reported changes in practices, both in the local offices, as is thoroughly presented in Kane and Spjelkavik's (2021; red) and confirmed by our informants. Some knowledge transfer has even been recognized from a national-wide perspective, as a top-level manager in Central NAV told us.

*'We do have examples from ALIN which has been used in service development in other regions, right? Where one has hit the target well and provided research design that have made marks. And [name of ALIN/UiT researcher] has been invited to several seminars and been well received.'*

Other results from ALIN have been more debated locally and centrally, and some did not sustain due to being too challenging to established practices, different professions, or lacking managerial support and understanding. However, over time, it becomes impossible to separate knowledge from ALIN from other learning processes. One participant from a local NAV told us in retrospect, the learning from the process continues as one keep on building on the new knowledge and practices beyond the structured project.

## The Evaluation and Termination

In 2020 Central NAV decided to evaluate national research collaborations, and they commissioned Oslo Economics, (OE) to assess and evaluate two of their national university agreements (see Fig. 1), to which UiT was one. Several UiT and ALIN actors were interviewed, and documents were provided during the process. The report highlighted different perspectives on research relevance. Regional NAV stated that they were satisfied with the good cooperation between researchers and the local welfare offices, and the project mostly achieved its objectives. Central NAV, however, expressed expectations for "more robust findings" and quantitative studies. They acknowledged that research was important for the local welfare offices but noted lack of research perceived as generalizable. The report from OE (Osloeconomics 2021) states:

*'[Central NAV] experienced that the research within the collaboration has been so closely tied to the local offices that it is difficult to generalize. Their expectation is that research should be conducted systematically, to find out if things work even when the 'passion factor' is removed. Results from qualitative research conducted at a few offices are not necessarily transferable to other offices and cannot form the basis for practices and development in NAV at the national level.'*

Furthermore, OE stated that communication between the partners and managerial levels had been poorly arranged. Based on these findings Central NAV decided not to prolong the collaboration agreement with UiT (see Fig. 1). The decision and report dismayed actors in UiT, Regional NAV and participants in established collaborations. In retrospect, our informants have provided several examples of conflicting perspectives in explaining what went wrong, considering both scientific and situational conditions, which we interpreted as aspect of research, action, and participation. Due to limited space, we have summarized the total findings in Table 2.

We found that participants experienced that OE ignored important documents and information concerning value creation and research activities and thus that academic publications were under-reported. Retrospectively, managers from UiT reported that perspectives on what constituted relevant and high-quality research had always been opposing between Central NAV and UiT. One example is expressed by one of the UiT managers involved:

*'I remember it was mentioned [by Central NAV] in a steering group meeting, that we didn't quite measure up to the level of those major medical research projects in Oslo*

*and other universities in relation to the Research Council. I think it was an unfair comparison.'*

From the perspective of Central NAV, it was not about opposing AR but wishing for more of a different kind of research. A top-level manager told us:

*'We are not principally against AR, but it needs to be used in the right areas with participation by all the people involved, and with a plan, otherwise it is just the number of projects we have arranged. Low impact even if the project was a success.'*

## Epilogue

While the OE documented Central NAV's concern about whether ALIN could be generalized, the authors of the ALIN anthology (Kane and Spjelkavik 2021 (red) predicted difficulties in transferring knowledge within NAV and continue development in time and space. Despite the lack of a formal agreement and research funding, the informal contact between the representatives in the cooperation committee continued, recognizing the need for a new regional level cooperation based on their positive experience from ALIN. In 2023, a new local agreement was signed by the UiT rector and Regional NAV (see Fig. 1). This contract legitimizes the collaboration, and enthusiasts remain in touch attempting to generate fundings and activities. However, it remains challenging for a few local participants to sustain high quality research projects without more formal and financial support, especially if one wants to establish high quality research projects.

*'I know that [service providers] involved in the project found it interesting. But the ownership at the level above us, that sort of own it (the project) and control it in terms of resources and decide how people should spend their time … I am uncertain whether they had a good understanding [of ALIN].'*

As for most research and development, AR can hardly survive without dedicated agreements and resources.

## Discussion

Our analysis has shown that there are several conflicting dimensions within each of Levin's three AR-fundaments. Here, we discuss some of the more intriguing dimensions to explain the practical challenges in AR, and to enhance the importance of reflection on the topics in research collaborations between academia and large and distributed organizations.

### What is good Quality Research?

Levin always welcomed a vibrant discussion, especially about AR. When suggesting that AR in organization development might have similarities to management consulting, he responded strongly concerning the importance of scientific rigor and academic contributions within AR. His concern about the legitimacy of AR in social sciences was even expressed in his late publications (Levin 2017), where he called for more transparency in scientific positioning of action researchers within a "*consistent ontological,*

*epistemological and methodological perspective*" (p 33, our translation), aligned with his previous rigor-relevance debate in Levin (2012).

Levin's was concerned about gaining legitimacy from the academic audience, whereas the practical relevance to the social world is inherently addressed by the core of AR: '*The relevance is not under debate. Since an AR-project is initiated to solve practical problems, the relevance is guaranteed'* (Levin 2017, p 35, our translation). This perspective implies that value creation in AR tend to favour the professional and practical needs at the expense of scientific rigor. Our case study revealed that ontological, epistemological, and methodological conflicts are present within the practitioner community, and even between interorganizational practitioner and academic researchers.

The viability of AR is not only about scientific publications demonstrating transparency and reflexivity (Levin 2017; Coghlan and Shani 2014), but also if the researchers (academics and practitioners) are able to convincingly communicate the scientific quality to funding decision makers. 'Native' practitioners in organizations are diverse and may have conflicting views on relevance and a strong concern with rigor and scientific qualities. From other scientific areas we find that institutions like NAV are highly political and that the interests from a central policy or strategy defining unit do have conflicting interpretations of interests and values given their societal perspectives and professional identities (Schofield 2001). Approaching questions, how knowledge is developed and organizational behaviour changes from both central, local and all levels between is theoretically, methodological and practically is at least overwhelming, and may be impossible. Yet, AR has more in common with what Schofield (2001) would characterize as bottom-up or learning approaches. As these approaches are complementary to traditional political science research within these problems, we call for more research in how knowledge from political science could problematize, enrich or even legitimate AR as a scientific field beyond established AR proponents.

Our findings confirm the image of dominance of positivist research in social science within universities and public funding bodies (Greenwood 2002), and professionals' tendency to encounter research project in their work life based on their educational background, even on Ph.D. level. When Levin called for improved academic quality in AR (Levin 2017), this was partly to enhance legitimacy among academic colleagues. Ironically, in terms of the ideas of the egalitarian knowledge creation process, we found that Levin were less concerned about the practitioners' scientific background and preferences. We find it highly relevant to address this beyond academic publications, particularly as the central units have formalized power in terms of policy definition and financial decisions. Thus, we strongly suggest that discussing the strengths of various research methods, ontological and epistemological positions should be part of the collective reflection with both managerial sponsors and involved professionals in AR activities.

## Who Takes part in what kind of Participation?

The R&D-strategy of Central NAV (2017) stated that the organization preferred 'research with' rather than 'research on' relevant problems, due to previous mixed experiences with irrelevant problem definitions from academics. This aligns with the contemporary trend of the '*woolly-words'* co-production and co-creation in public policy and public services (Osborne et al. 2016) which includes the interests of society and the public services users. Yet, 'researching with' suits the concept of 'participation' from AR and OD traditions (Burnes and Cooke 2012). Participation can be grounded in a plethora of rationalities and

forms, whether direct or indirect, from democratic values, individual psychological and motivational factors, to technocratic efficiency, focusing on different levels from micro to macro (Dachler and Wilpert 1978).

One might suggest that Levin belonged to the generation of '*white-collar hippies'* (Burnes and Cooke 2012) with as strong liberation and democratization agenda. Levin stated: *Participation is a right in itself*, *and in this respect*, *it needs no further arguments to prove its relevance* (Levin 2004, p.73). Levin's theories could be argued of being rooted on team level perspectives, where he states that real participation should involve 'collective reflection' by organizational members taking part in shaping their own situation (Levin 2004). ALIN is a good example of a safe space for learning through collective reflection, where the good relationships between members in smaller practitioner-researchers are formed. Building personal relationships between members in collaboration has been proven to be a precondition for learning (Edmondson 2004) and solve conflicts (Grant et al. 2008). Our findings align with these team level perspectives as seen in the successful ALIN project.

The trouble arises when we include the larger and hierarchical system of the NAV organization. Participation on individual or team level assume that conflicting interests can be managed towards consensus. Conflicting goals and perspectives might be solved by collective reflection, but Levin's writings, and AR, OD, or participation literature in general, offer little guidance on resolving conflicts when not everyone can have a seat at the table. Our case findings address that AR projects seen on a macro level foster conflicts and political power struggles that realistically cannot be resolved by collective reflection alone (Buchanan and Badham 1999). The growing practice of co-creation in research has demonstrated various challenges when a myriad of service users, professionals and decision makers in complex organizations in health care have common means towards research and knowledge creation (Oliver et al. 2019). There is a huge risk of power struggles, and the cost of wide involvement often exceeds the desired values within democratic rights, impact or research quality (ibid.), which corresponds with the conflict dimensions we have found in this case study. Thus, we suggest as successors of Levin have an obligation to investigate and resolve challenges in participation from multiple perspectives.

## Continuous Organization Development on a Macro Level?

The prevailing linear rationality lays premises for social sciences (Abbott 1988) and organizational development (Burnes and Cooke 2012) and seems persistent and unavoidable. AR is among several perspectives that argue for dialectic, emergent and cyclical models in change and knowledge (Coghlan and Shani 2014). In Levin's AR model cyclical sequences of planning, action, evaluation and theorizing by collaboration partners from practice and research, with equal power and a common openness to mutual learning from the very essence of development and learning outcome (Greenwood and Levin 1998a). This approach shares the non-linearity with contemporary practical concepts like lean, agile, and the learning organization e.g. Suomalainen et al. (2015) and theoretical perspectives from political science (Schofield 2001).

As for participation, these perspectives and approaches are mostly adapted at a group level. Learning and development through relational and reflective processes between participants from practice and academia demands immense resources, time, and finances, and cannot guarantee specified outcomes (Burnes and Cooke 2012). As our case showed, from the perspectives of central management, large public organizations cannot avoid causal

chains of arguments in prioritizing use of tax-money. Outcome should be predicted and measured in a benefits management logic, developments should be de-contextualized and spread to secure substantiality and standardized level and quality of services to end-users and service providers. Levin's claims that AR might demand resources but saves the organization from implementation costs (Levin 2004), may seem highly naïve given Central NAV as a typical case of a large, bureaucratic system.

Levin warned against 'co-optation', where one adapted rhetoric and methods from AR, but kept the bureaucratic power structures in systems of defining and financing research (Greenwood and Levin 1998a): *[A]s AR is about participation, democracy, and "empowerment", all politically correct terms at the moment, there is tremendous pressure to adopt the language of AR but to continue to operate in the orthodox way* (p 259). In the ALIN case, the AR was real, contributing to participation, change and rigorous scientific knowledge. While ALIN serves as a successful example with all the aspects of Levin's AR covered, projects like this are rarely desert islands in time, space, or structure. Levin never provided a clear answer to how one could change the power structure in large bureaucracies through collective reflection. We wish we could have discussed these issues further with Levin and hope that his successors in AR scholarship can explore how AR could be applied in a macro perspective to further discuss the identified conflict dimensions from our case study.

## Conclusion

Is AR legitimized as a scientific contribution in a research collaboration from the central sponsors? Well, from the perspective of central sponsors it is not about disapproving of AR but missing 'real research' and looking for it elsewhere. Thus, there are some conflicting views on AR relevant to address.

In this article, we have elucidated how successful research in terms of Levin's AR approach can be received within various conflict dimensions in a large and distributed organization. These conflict dimensions can be severe barriers for the legitimacy and funding of AR projects, but also other fields of participatory research (e.g. co-creation), incremental and bottom-up development. Whereas Levin's writings distinctly state the importance of securing scientific quality to improve the legitimacy of AR within academic circles, we call for enhanced focus on the politics and scientific perspectives within policy defining and financing levels in large organizations. AR requires legitimation and support not only in academia but also in public administration.

We suggest that recognizing and integrating knowledge from AR projects can significantly impact public service development at the central (national) level. However, this requires an organizational structure that facilitates learning and implementation from the local level upwards. It is crucial to continue discussions on AR to legitimize it within large organizations, ensuring they can secure research funding and effectively apply knowledge from AR projects to design and improve national services.

While large organizations could benefit from improving the understanding and practice of AR, AR research could benefit from other theoretical fields and discourses within political science and organizational change management who also debate the local-central, top-down-bottom-up, emergent-planned. Here, we see why there is a need to enhance the voice and perspective of the suppressed participants and distal parts of an organization in terms of democratic goals. However, wider descriptions on participation versus structures

of power and various interests would make Levin's work even more relevant to researchers and practitioners stiving for continuous change through action.

We thank Morten Levin for his contributions, which can move us toward more democratic knowledge development.

**Data Availability** No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Data collection and processing comply with General Data Protection Regulation and are approved by SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in education and Research).

**Consent to Participate** Participants have consented participation and publishing of data.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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