

Using the Viable Systems Model to Make Organisational Action Research More Sustainable

Petter Øgland, PhD
University of Oslo
Department of Informatics
P. O. Box 1080 Blindern, 0316 Oslo, Norway
petterog@ifi.uio.no

Jens Johan Kaasbøll, Dr.Philos.
University of Oslo
Department of Informatics
P. O. Box 1080 Blindern, 0316 Oslo, Norway
jensj@ifi.uio.no

Abstract

Organisational action research is frequently criticised for failing to produce sustainable change beyond the duration of specific projects or leadership regimes. Such failures are often attributed to contextual contingencies such as organisational politics, sectoral constraints, or lack of management commitment. This paper argues that these explanations are insufficient. Instead, many sustainability problems in action research reflect shortcomings in how action research methodologies themselves are theorised and designed. The paper focuses on the Networks of Action (NOA) approach, which builds on the bootstrap algorithm (BA) from information infrastructure research and theories of complex adaptive systems. While NOA has been globally successful in the long-running Health Information Systems Programme (HISP), similar applications in local public administration have repeatedly failed. We argue that this contrast cannot be explained by context alone, but points to an under-theorisation of control, coordination, intelligence, and identity in BA-based action research. Drawing on Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM), the paper proposes a re-articulation of NOA as a viable action research system in its own right. Through retrospective analysis of both successful and failed NOA-based initiatives, the paper demonstrates how distributing viability functions beyond a single client organisation can enhance the sustainability of action research. The contribution is methodological rather than empirical: the paper reframes action research failure as a systemic design problem and shows how the VSM can be used to design more sustainable Networks of Action.

Keywords: Action research; Networks of Action; Viable System Model; Bootstrap Algorithm; Sustainability; Organisational Cybernetics