Co–creating New Dancefloors Through a Parallel Organisation: Organisational development through union–management cooperation in the public sector

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Abstract

Across industries, union density is under great pressure from different forms of organisations and, in many ways, a more individualised working life. Employee relations within the public sector have undergone a transition due to privatisation, decentralisation, and the adoption of quality management approaches. Employee relations in Nordic countries are strongly embedded in national regulations and agreements. However, research on organisational development within the public sector rarely includes discussions of the union role. The Nordic model perspective acknowledges that the different social parties share interests and visions, and it promotes a collective effort when organisational development is sought. This paper poses the question of how public organisations can change the "boxing and dancing" behaviour in union–management relationships through the establishment of a parallel organisation (PO). The PO serves as a different organisational mode when the operating organisation is unable to successfully deal with certain prevailing issues, where knowledge rather than authority should determine decisions. The findings show that the PO creates a "dancefloor", less confined by bureaucratic barriers, where unions and managers co-create new relations. In addition, participants experience more enhancement of their roles, and their focus towards developing their workplace collectively is more prominent. Our findings contribute to the industrial relations literature by proposing POs as a tool for building relations between unions and managers in a public organisation. Our paper also contributes to the PO literature by proposing that the inclusion of unions in a PO can be crucial when attempting to transfer outcomes into the operating organisation.

Keywords: Organisational development, Action Research, union–management cooperation, parallel organisation, public sector

1. Introduction

In November 2014, the main Norwegian unions at the national level initiated trial several projects within several large public organisations. The primary goal was to improve the quality of their services for the benefit of employees and clients. We were involved in one of these public organisations, the Norwegian Public Roads Administration. Their HR department found that employee participation in external workshops and learning activities seemed predominantly to result in individual learning rather than organisational rewards, like collective organisational development. The management, union representatives, and employees wanted to develop closer relations to move towards stronger and expanded union–management cooperation.

In international studies of industrial relations, the Nordic countries are often described as possessing highly organised labour markets, high levels of unionisation, and well-functioning systems of industrial relations (Jensen, 2017; Nergaard, 2020). This article aligns with a mutual gains approach to industrial relations that sees union–management cooperation as a fruitful strategy for unions when looking after the interests of their rank-and-file members (Ackers, 2015; Kochan et al., 2009). Huzzard and Nilsson (2004) indicated that a close partnership between management and union is easier within industrial contexts because the union's strong legal position creates a level of trust and confidence that makes it easier to participate in organisational development (OD). However, this is true mainly for large industrial companies where the union has a strong, legal position. In fact, literature on union–management cooperation within the public sector shows that there are several barriers when organisations seek to develop cooperative relations between unions and management that go beyond traditional bargaining, and when direct participation is sought (Bie-Drivdal, 2021; Gold et al., 2019). These barriers can be related to decisions being made politically, changes tend to be initiated top-down, and to the notion that unions tend to deal with wages and working conditions rather than looking past traditional bargaining matters (Bie-Drivdal, 2021).

The Nordic industrial relations system has paved the way for many OD projects, involving a large number of companies with political and institutional support (Levin, 2002). In Norway, the trade unions' participation in OD dates to the aftermath of the Industrial Democracy Program (Emery et al., 1976; Herbst, 1977), and has evolved into a variety of workplace innovation practices and learning models (Johnsen et al., 2021; Klev & Levin, 2012). It is a paradox that most of these union–management-based OD projects in Norway take place in industrial companies, while unionisation is much higher within the public sector. In fact, the unionisation level within the public sector is stable at around 80 percent, in contrast to 38 percent within the private sector (Nergaard, 2020). The high level of unionisation in the Nordic countries is to some extent due to a large public sector where employees usually are organised in unions (Jensen, 2017). There is relatively limited research on OD projects in the public sector where the role of union representatives is included (Bie-Drivdal, 2019; 2021). However, recently attention has focused on the transformation of industrial relations systems in this sector, and the consequences for those working within it (Kjellberg, 2021). Increased privatisation and the use of work systems familiar to the private sector, such as the

decentralisation of service delivery, the adoption of quality management systems such as new public management (Boyne, 2002), and increasingly individualised forms of management, have impacted the management of people in the public sector (Lucio, 2007; Poole et al., 2006). This again often leads to what Exton and Totterdill (2009) have called a "low-road" approach to governance.

Zand (1974) introduced a tool for developing public organisations in the 1970s where the purpose is to avoid structural obstacles by creating a more flexible organisational form called a parallel organisation (PO). A PO is constructed when the operating organisation (OO) is unable to deal with certain prevailing issues, for example, the introduction of new technology (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974). POs have been developed and tested in several projects in which the organisations seek OD (see Hawk & Zand, 2014; Engesbak & Ingvaldsen, 2018; Bushe & Shani, 1991 for examples). The potential strength of including the trade union as a partner in OD has been established (Claussen, Haga and Ravn (2021); Finnestrand, 2011; Øyum et al., 2010), although these studies does not include the establishment of a PO structure. Our understanding of OD rests on Levin's (2004) two main foundations. Firstly, the most crucial feature of the change activity is the *participation* of organisational members, who take part in shaping their own work situation. Secondly, the *type of learning process* that is supported in the OD activity is important, which in this paper is defined as collective reflection processes that creates insights that feed back to new and improved organisational practices (Levin, 2004, p. 72). Also, research has put the spotlight on how the involvement of employees in decision-making and strategic matters could help drive the organisations' ability to innovate, through employee driven innovation (EDI) (Høyrup, 2012).

We view the PO in line with Huzzard et al.'s (2004) metaphor of dancing on the dancefloor, which involves including both unions and managers in an arena for cooperation and OD. The question is therefore: How does the establishment of a PO change the "boxing and dancing" behaviour in union–management cooperation in the OO within the public sector?

The data were collected within a Norwegian public organisation. We explore this question by presenting the findings from our case study of an Action Research (AR) project, lasting more than one year. The AR project was designed in line with AR approaches (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), which in this case included action researchers, HR facilitators, managers, union representatives, and employees working together on developing their organisation. We collaborated closely with primarily the HR department in the design and execution of the OD project.

2. Organisational development through union–management cooperation

The industrial relations literature has considered labour–management relations in "transition" and undergoing change in different contexts and countries (Hyman, 2018; Rødvei, 2008; Bean, 2021; Kjellberg, 2021). Originally, labour-management relations refer to the interactions between employees, as represented by labour unions, and their employers. A labour union is an organization formed by workers in a particular trade, industry, or company for the purpose of improving pay, benefits, and working conditions for its rank-and-file members. Basically, this takes place through collective negotiations between the labour unions and the employers' associations on both national and company level. In Norway, there is a high rate of unionization among workers, a long tradition of collective bargaining between the social parties, in addition to a very regulated system for labour market conflicts in collaboration between employers/management, employees/union and government (Kongsvik & Finnestrand, 2022). The degree of unionization has been stable at around 50 percent in recent years, and in the public sector the degree of unionization is as much as 80 percent (NOU, 2021:9). In addition to this, the Nordic approach to labour-management relations has been characterized by cooperation for mutual gains (Eikeland, 2012).

The main argument for the mutual gains approach is that management and union share the same essential goals, values, and interests (Heckscher, 2001; Kochan et al., 2009), and that trade unions have certain characteristics that may enhance organizational development. For example, research shows that trade unions contribute to a long-term and organisation-wide perspective when involved in decision-making (Finnestrand, 2011). In addition, trade union networks can provide an effective communication infrastructure that facilitates lateral communication and coordination both intra- and inter-organisation (Addison, 2005). Unions can also promote stability, trust, and commitment through a strong relationship with management because elected representatives protect and represent employees when change is sought (Gill, 2009; Kochan & Osterman, 1994; Levine, 1995).

This requires that the union has an active voice in the company, which is listened to and followed up by the management. For example, Oeij et al. (2015) described a case in their study where the union accepted cross-cutting policies and lay-offs because the company was in an open, constructive, and honest dialogue with them. The management provided them with a voice about the company's and the employees' future. Furthermore, Gill (2009) has shown how union–management cooperation can have positive effects on individual employees' involvement in OD issues. In these instances, the level or quality of union representation play a crucial role. Oeij et al. (2015), who studied workplace innovation practices, argued that union representatives play an important role in (co-) designing and developing workplace innovation and its implementation partly because management realises that employee participation is crucial for support and success. Finally, recent research indicates that trade unions have the potential to proactively address prerequisites for sustainable work, which appears to be a very important role in future working life (Harlin et al., 2021).

However, the actual conduct of union–management cooperation in public sector organisations may be difficult to develop and sustain (Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018). This is primarily because public organisations are characterised by more bureaucratic structures (Farnham & Horton, 1996) and have lower managerial autonomy, than private organisations (Boyne, 2002). This is because decisions are often made politically, where the local managers or employees have none or limited opportunity to apply their voice (Falkum et al., 2009). This means that the structural changes that can be introduced are limited. Attempts to navigate such "public barriers" have involved transferring the approaches and models of private organisations to public organisations. For example, projects and temporary modes of organising have been used to deliver or transform services, notably with little evidence of success (Hodgson et al., 2019). Although innovation policies have been increasingly introduced in the public sector, these are rarely implemented successfully due to gaps between the management groups at different hierarchical levels and overly bureaucratic control systems (Whilman et al., 2016). Consequently, researchers have turned to investigating how unions have changed their role and how managers and unions can jointly overcome the barriers to cooperation (Connolly et al., 2017; Gold et al., 2019).

In summary, one may conclude that projects aimed at OD could be more successful by building on union–management cooperation. An important proposition of how to create arenas for successful union–management cooperation is given by Huzzard et al. (2004) who promoted a perspective in which the partnership arena is viewed as different dancefloors, where unions can "box" and "dance". There is still an arena for bargaining (boxing), but also there is cooperation on the dancefloor with a more developmental focus. The metaphor of boxing and dancing supports, in our case, the development of suitable arenas, or dancefloors, for union–management cooperation within public sector organisations. We elaborate on the application of this metaphor in the findings chapter. The next section outlines some propositions about how workplaces can facilitate a "dancing" environment through a systematic and strategic intervention, namely, the PO.

3. Developing a parallel organisation for organisational development

For organisations to work with and solve complex, ill-defined strategic issues, Zand (1974) proposed using a PO as a systematic and strategic intervention. He promoted free-form organisations, participative leadership, and humanistic values, rather than hierarchical organisations, directive leadership, and mechanistic values. Fundamental to this perspective is the notion that knowledge rather than level of authority should determine decisions, and that environmental complexity and turbulence should lead to group decision-making. The PO serves as a different organisational mode when the OO is unable to successfully deal with certain prevailing issues (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974), such as a hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation. Compared with a project having a clear end product as the desired outcome, a PO is more concerned about the process leading to defining and finding solutions by building common ground.

Hawk and Zand (2014) claimed that authority or production centred organisations often work best with "well-structured" problems, while knowledge- and problem-centred organisations work better with "ill-structured" problems. Production centred OOs rely on authority, hierarchy, specialisation, and defined, predictable, repetitive routines. These organisations are often challenged by unique, ill-defined, system-wide, complex, or strategic issues, especially those requiring the knowledge, experience, and insight of people across organisational levels and locations to be combined in a collaborative, creative mode. In the context of public organisations, research shows that there are more formal procedures for making decisions, and that these organisations are less flexible and less likely to take big risks, which entails more bureaucracy (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Farnham & Horton, 1996). Furthermore, public organisations also experience more delays and subsequent irritation caused by formalisation and stagnation (Bozeman et al., 1992). Finally, lower managerial autonomy entails that managers have less freedom to act differently or appropriately based on the context or the individual circumstances they face (Boyne, 2002). The characteristics of public organisations mean that POs and different organisational modes are a possible intervention, as the OO can clearly benefit from being more flexible and able to cope with ill-defined issues or from the facilitation of organisational learning (Bushe & Shani, 1991). Hawk and Zand (2014, pp. 309-3010) define the conceptual dimensions of a parallel organisation as:

1. The purpose of the parallel organisation (PO) is to identify, define, and solve issues of a strategic nature (ill-defined, non-routine, unpredictable, and ambiguous).
2. The PO creatively complements the operating organisation (OO); it does not displace the formal OO.
3. The PO consists of a steering unit (SUN) that guides one or more basic inquiry groups (BINs). The SUN may specify what is not acceptable for the BINs to explore and may accept or reject issues for inquiry. Inquiry units can only make recommendations to the SUN. They do not have hierarchical power and cannot issue directives to the OO.
4. The SUN communicates with the BINs in circular feedback loops to provide guidance, exchange information, and collaboratively shape recommendations.
5. Outputs of the PO mode are the inputs to the OO mode.
6. The SUN works with the BINs to determine tasks and review progress.
7. BINs enable new combinations of people, new channels of communication, and new ways of viewing old ideas.
8. The PO operates with exploratory-inquiry norms (questioning, collaboration, consensus) that differ from the OO's directive-compliance norms.

Empirical case studies provide us with descriptions in varying detail of an actual organisational development (OD) intervention, often from an action research (AR) perspective (Hawk & Zand, 2014). A primary purpose of AR is to produce practical knowledge useful to people in their everyday lives, as well as to bring about change in organisations by building competencies for

self-help among participants and contributing to scientific knowledge (Coghlan & Shani, 2014; Shani & Coghlan, 2019). However, it is far more challenging for organisations to create knowledge or new capabilities than to identify more tangible resources such as finance and physical inventory (Roth et al., 2007). Action researchers often help bring together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice in order to ensure a better understanding of prevailing issues and to realise changes (Eikeland, 2012; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Gustavsen, 2017; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). McIntosh (2010) argue that reflective practice in AR is both of a way of collecting data and for the participants to learn. Greenwood and Levin (2007) emphasise the importance of being able to facilitate reflection among the research participants as a way of producing both theoretical and practical knowledge. They claim that "a professional action researcher can assist the local group in opening up its sense of the situation and some options for the future" (Greenwood & Levin, 2007 p. 120). The democratic perspective of AR and the notion of involving participants across organisational levels, making management and unions accountable, might also aid the challenge of obtaining approval in the OO, when ideas and actions are formulated in the PO (see Engesbak & Ingvaldsen, 2018).

AR practitioners are different stakeholders within the organisation (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), which in our research case included management, HR, union representatives, and employees from different trades. This collaboration is an arena for collective learning where changes are made based on the organisation's practice and prevailing issues. Bushe's (1988) classic work addressed the possibilities of a PO as a facilitator of cooperative relationships. His plea for more attention regarding relations between union officials, workers, and managers who interact daily is shown to still be of importance, as the AR project described in the next section placed the spotlight on developing such relationships.

4. Research design and method

4.1. Research design

The data were gathered over the course of two years (2016–2018) as part of an AR research project in a large Norwegian public organisation. Our research team included three action researchers and one PhD student, and the action researchers had an active role in planning the project, providing conceptual and theoretical (Bolman & Deal, 2017) tools, and interacting with the practitioners. It is also important to point out that the first author had a more detached role throughout the project as a PhD student. Evaluation reports were written by the researchers both at a midway point and at the end of the project, and they were presented and discussed with the organisation's steering unit for common learning and further decisions. We also had regular discussions with the steering unit throughout the project. A more detailed description of the steering unit is given in the next section. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the AR project activities.
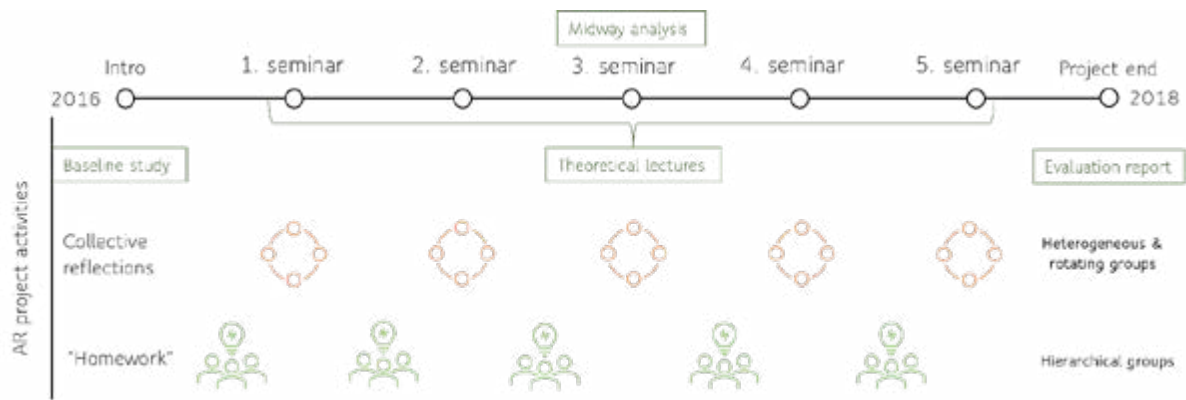
Figure 1: AR project activities

The AR project consisted of several activities across the organisation. In this paper, we focus mainly on one part of the project, which is the management development seminars. The activities within the management seminars are illustrated in figure 1, namely research activities, theoretical lectures, collective reflections amongst participants, and homework in between the seminars. The AR process itself builds on AR projects that have been developed within the private sector from The Industrial Democracy project in the 1960s until today (see Qvale, 1976; Gustavsen, 1992; Finnestrand, 2011; Claussen, Haga & Ravn, 2021). This includes the involvement of union representatives and a normative idea of building democracy in the workplace.

In the management seminars, there were participants from three different managerial levels and from several unions. The collective reflection groups were rotating and heterogeneous, which means that the participants took part in different groups, with different compositions throughout the activities. At the end of each seminar, the groups became more homogeneous and hierarchical, meaning groups based on management solely or based on roles, as a preparation to undertake the homework. The groups that carried out homework assignments were assembled based on the hierarchical structures in the OO. In addition, facilitators from HR provided guidance and process tools throughout the collective group activities. A more thorough description of the different participants and activities is given in the findings chapter.

For further discussions around project activities, we consider it important to give a more detailed description of why we defined the AR project as a PO. In line with the PO literature, we observe that the AR project is an arena that is established as a parallel structure, which reports back to the OO. The PO enables working with different types of questions and matters that are more loosely defined than in a formal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical organisation. The characteristics and structure of the AR project, now defined as a PO, gave us a theoretical framework when analysing the outcomes of the activities (Hawk & Zand, 2014). The composition of the steering unit (SUN) and the basic inquiry unit (BIN) is also important. Figure 2 provides a simple illustration of how we defined these units.
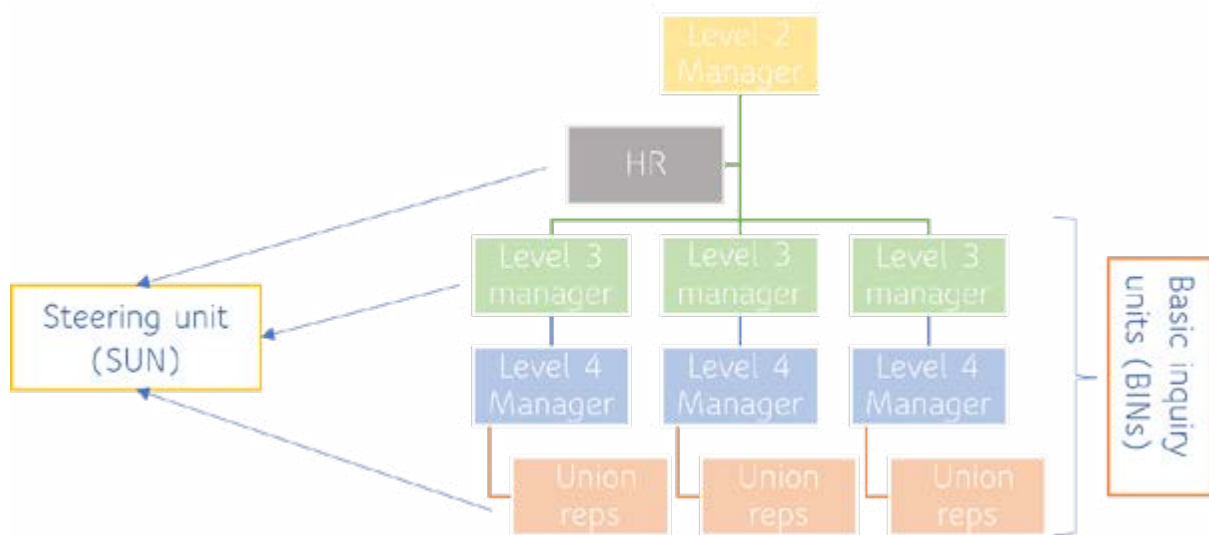
Figure 2: Defining the SUN and BIN(s)

Before examining the different units in detail, note that there are different levels of management within the OO; for example, the department manager (level 2), area managers (level 3), and local managers (level 4). As illustrated in figure 2, the SUN consists of representatives from HR, level 3 managers, and union representatives. Furthermore, it is important to note that the HR department representatives in the SUN are highly represented, with the responsibility of reporting to the level 2 manager. Also, the HR department is highly represented throughout the project and in the PO, as project managers and facilitators, which in this case is something different from their representation in the SUN. The HR representatives in the SUN have overall responsibility for planning, execution, and resource allocation, whilst level 3 managers and union representatives have the opportunity to give advice and suggestions. Ultimately, the cooperation in the SUN governed the activities carried out in the PO and guided the process in the intended direction.

As shown in figure 2, the BINs consisted of participants from different levels and roles within the OO. During the PO activities, the units were both heterogeneous and homogeneous, which meant that during some activities, the participants were divided based on roles, for example, groups consisting of union representatives. In other activities, the roles and levels were mixed, which also gave the participants experience with a more collective way of dealing with organisational matters. The process of working together and creating dancefloors, not limited by barriers from the OO, is described and analysed in the findings chapter.

4.2. Methods

We conducted 37 interviews in total, which included 15 individual and 22 group interviews (two or three participants). The data we used in this paper are part of a larger archive and consist both of field notes on project activities and of transcribed semi-structured and group interviews. The entire body of data comprises our entire collection of field notes and interviews with managers, union representatives, and other participants in the development project. The first author collected, transcribed, and analysed parts of the data material as a part of their [separate] PhD project. The co-authors had a more active role, as action researchers, taking part in designing the project, providing theoretical lectures, and collecting and analysing the data material. Table 1 describes the different phases of data collection through interviews as well as observations of project activities.

Table 1. Data gathered throughout the project

Interviews	Project management group + HR	Level 3 management	Level 4 management	Union reps	Workers
Pre-project	1 individual interview	1 group interview	3 group interviews		2 group interviews
Midway evaluation					13 individual interviews
Project end	1 individual interview 2 group interviews	1 group interview	3 group interviews	4 group interviews	6 group interviews
Observation	6 union-management development seminars				

In this paper, we emphasise the realities and experiences of the project participants. The analysis of field notes, observations, and transcribed interviews led us towards a generative process where an observed phenomenon required further evaluation and discussions. Going back and forth between the empirical data and theoretical concepts helped us to define interesting phenomena and find theoretical concepts that helped to describe and investigate the research question. Drawing upon Gioia et al. (2013), Table 2 illustrates the process of breaking down data into concepts, themes, and dimensions. The first-order concepts are classified as "pre-project" and "post-project" to better illustrate the development over time.

Table 2. Analysis of transcribed data

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimensions
Pre	Lack of interactions between unions and managers "Us against them" type of situation Formal structures for cooperation in place	Union–management cooperation limited to bargaining and conflict	Expanding union–management relations
Post	Building relationships between union reps and managers Awareness about similar goals/joint goals Better defined roles for managers and unions	Union–management cooperation based on cooperation	
Pre	Low degree of sharing responsibilities with union reps Unions not included in goal setting or decision-making Unions not actively engaging in making suggestions for improvement	Lacking procedures for knowledge and responsibility sharing	New procedures for organisational development
Post	Unions and managers discuss aims and decisions as a joint effort More focus on learning and development, less focus on "crunching numbers" Higher degree of knowledge sharing	Developing the organisation in a joint effort	

In addition to the two aggregated dimensions, we also provide a baseline analysis of the AR project design and context, which is considered in the findings chapter. This is relevant and particularly interesting because of the character of the public organisation and how the PO provided a different and necessary organisational mode. The development of a PO and the process of working within a more flexible and developmental environment is a phenomenon that needed further investigation.

5. Findings

Our findings are discussed based on our baseline analysis and on the dimensions presented in Table 2: "expanding union–management relations" and "new procedures for organisational development". We aimed to investigate how the development of a PO can enable OD through union–management cooperation in the public sector.

5.1. Baseline analysis of AR design and context

The AR project was defined as a national agency project, although the main activities were in the Traffics and Vehicle department (TVD), with the regional director as project owner. The SUN, with feedback to the regional director, was responsible for the overall economics, time frame, and quality of the project. The AR project was called "TVD-development" and the department worked on it from 2015 to the end of 2017. TVD employed approximately 500 people spread over a range of professional departments and geographically dispersed locations. A department can be characterised as hierarchical as it consisted of three managerial levels and decisions were often made by top levels of management. Work routines were highly determined by national and international legislation, and there was limited scope of action. The character of the TVD is illustrated through several managers' experiences of how decisions were made and how employees were often not included in decision-making:

"Decisions are often made over our heads […] We need to prepare our employees for the changes that are coming. Our employees are competent, but they need time" (Level 3 manager).

"As managers, we decide and are responsible, and the employees must do what we tell them to do. Even though they might have sensible suggestions. We use a lot of time and resources to explain why they are not involved in every decision" (Level 3 manager).

These experiences show that authority was mostly held by the managers and that the daily practice was regulated both politically and by the upper part of the organisational chain of command. In addition, the second quotation says something about the extent to which employees were included in decision-making, indicating a low degree of autonomy This interpretation is also supported by an introductory presentation from the project manager in TDV, about the challenges in the organisation. The findings were: 1) mangers, particular on the lower levels, feel confined and insecure by bureaucratic rules, 2) employees are not sure how to contribute and take responsibility for the common work environment, and 3) formal arenas for union-management collaboration is not systemically followed up in the organisation. Our interviews in the beginning of the project confirmed and expanded this understanding. In particular, participants reported limited collaboration between the lowest rank of managers and the local union representative, which was explained by 1) more involvement of union representative on the regional level than the local, 2) few lower mangers not knowing their local union representatives, 3) many different labour unions, and 4) not acknowledging local representatives as a potential resource for development, not only a "watch dog".

Several of these challenges seemed to be connected to the characteristics of public organisations as described by Boyne (2002). The organisation was not flexible, the hierarchy limited communication, and processes of decision-making were cumbersome or executed at higher organisational levels. These characteristics reflect how the PO literature defines formal

organisations as less flexible and less equipped to deal with ill-defined issues (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974). By establishing a PO, the TVD was able to overcome some barriers to communication, reflection, and cooperation within the OO. With that in mind, we viewed the AR project initiated within the TVD as a PO.

As researchers, we performed the role of friendly outsiders within the project (Greenwood & Levin, 2007); we facilitated reflection, contributing with theoretical perspectives, and conducting research. The design of the management development seminars was based on theoretical perspectives of OD, such as organisational structure, power perspectives, human relations, and organisational culture and, finally, training in using these perspectives in practice through multi-perspective analysis (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Figure 3 illustrates the different stages and activities within the PO.
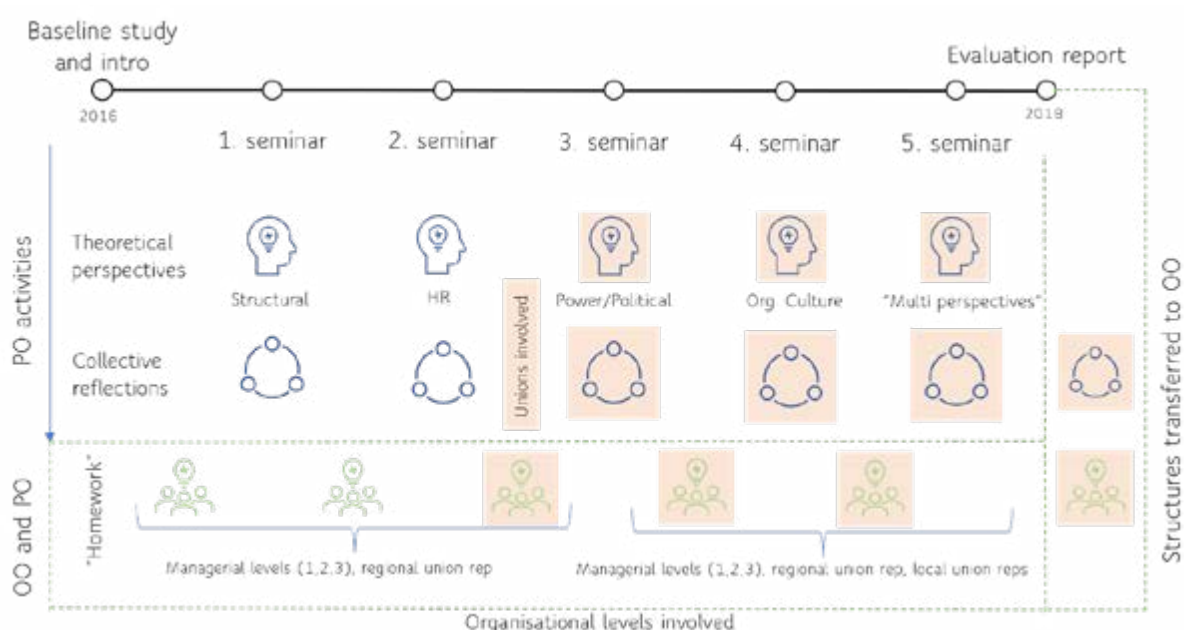

Figure 3: PO activities

We introduced managers and union representatives to these perspectives over the course of five seminars. The seminar discussions, which were organised in heterogeneous and rotating groups, created an arena for critical reflection, knowledge sharing, and the development of improved practices and services to the public. As shown in Figure 3, there was a turning point after the second seminar. In fact, the homework between seminars two and three required the management groups to involve and work collectively with the union representatives. The homework assignment prompted managers and union reps to collectively discuss what they needed from each other to succeed with developing their organisation. Going forward, local union representatives were included in the PO. To make this happen, a document with information about all of the local union reps was developed, which helped managers not only in the PO, but was also helpful to locate the representatives in ordinary work processes within the OO. The process and realisation following the turning

point in the PO also had consequences in the OO, as the management groups started including local union representatives in their management meetings.

The arena for reflection and knowledge sharing (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; McIntosh, 2010) provided participants with the opportunity to identify less defined and non-routine matters, as proposed in Table 1 (Hawk & Zand, 2014). Each group had one or two facilitators from the HR department who helped to guide the discussions. As illustrated in Figure 3, the homework activities became a task that had to be carried out in the PO as well as in the OO, because it required the participants taking the time in their daily work to complete the assignment. The combination of more theoretical input provided by the researchers and feedback between the SUN and BINs ensured a cooperative structure and guidance.

The character of the project gave participants from different groups within the department a new way of working together; they were able to "compare notes" and to reflect on both similar and different practices, and the discussions had the character of exploratory–inquiry norms, that differ from OO's directive-compliance norms. This means that the parallel norms promote careful questioning and analysis of goals, assumptions, methods, alternatives, and evaluation criteria. (Hawk & Zand, 2014). One of the union representatives commented on the experience of working on this type of project, and on how the PO provided an arena for cooperation:

"With the TVD-development project, we had an arena where we built relationships, and that is really important. In our day-to-day work, you do not have time to do that. The managers also participated in the seminars, and that gave us the possibility of being in the same room and taking part in joint discussions" (Union representative).

As this experience indicates, the PO provided opportunities for the participants to engage in cooperative and reflective actions that would otherwise be difficult in their day-to-day working life in the OO. They created an arena that was beyond the cumbersome bureaucracy and red tape (Boyne, 2002), which meant that the sharing of experiences and perspectives was less dependent on position, authority, or role.

To sum up, the pre-project situation in the TVD was highly regulated, constrained by bureaucratic characteristics, and limited in its structures for union–management cooperation. During the project, however, some of these challenges were overcome through the creation of a PO that improved cooperation and communication. In the following section, we further discuss how the PO and the activities impacted on union–management relations and cooperation.

5.2. Expanding union–management relations

The character of the TVD had previously limited how unions and management worked together, which also affected the matters that they usually dealt with in a joint effort. For the most part, they interacted in relation to bargaining and/or conflict situations. As mentioned earlier, the Nordic countries have traditionally had high levels of organised union membership (Nergaard, 2020), and partnerships in the workplace are often characterised as cooperative and focused on strategic issues at all levels (Eikeland, 2012). However, our case illustrated a situation with a high level of membership but limited cooperation. According to our field notes from the third management development seminar, managers had little knowledge of who the local union representatives were and where they were located, which became an issue when the homework assignment had to be carried out. Important to note here, is that there were no big conflicts to solve, rather a process of moving beyond bargaining focuses between the partners, defining roles, and clarifying the potentials of working collectively and more actively towards developing their organisation.

The PO provided the union representatives and managers with the opportunity to come together and reflect on matters beyond bargaining and conflicts. It is important to note that not all union representatives were able to participate in the PO, but they were included in PO-related matters within the OO. As previously mentioned, the turning point after seminar two had effects concerning the inclusion of union representatives in the OO. The homework assignment forced managers and union representatives to participate in a "dancing class", practicing dance routines that would be carried out in the OO. By working together on homework assignments and in mixed groups, hereby meaning participants across organisational levels, issues were raised pertaining to both their different and mutual interests. Even though it is not surprising that if you work together, you learn about the other's interests, this was a necessary realisation to the participants to move forward in the process. One manager shared his experience of getting to know the union representatives and how that led to the realisation that they had some mutual goals:

"First of all, we get to know the union representatives. Previously, that was not something I focused on. We had a very limited dialogue [...] We have our separate roles, of course, but we have the same goals when it comes to developing ourselves and being as good as possible" (Level 2 manager).

This manager's experiences clearly show that the communication between the partners was limited at the start of this project. During and after the project, however, they established a new relationship, central to which was reflecting on mutual goals and developing the organisation. Moreover, the experimental and reflective approaches are connected to AR (McIntosh, 2010; Greenwood and Levin, 2007), and the participants engaged in processes where knowledge and perspective sharing resulted in both individual and collective developments (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Their goal was to find ways of developing their department jointly. Like the manager's experience, one of the union representatives also found that the dialogue had changed during the project:

"I can see that the managers have better knowledge of who the union reps are and have included us to a greater extent. […] We have a more open dialogue between us" (Union representative).

During the AR project, therefore, the role of the union representatives was more clearly defined, because who they were, where they were located, and what their role was within the management groups were established. According to Rubenstein (2001), this can give unions a more distinct voice within managerial and organisational processes, which in turn also represents the employees' voices and perspectives. A stronger relationship between the partners also provides a longer-term perspective and can result in higher levels of commitment and trust throughout the organisation (Gill, 2009).

Based on this section, we can see that managers felt more in control at the end of the project and perceived a larger room for development and actions. The collaboration between labour unions and management was substantially improved. 1) managers and union representative better understood the purpose and role of each other, 2) managers got to know their local union representatives, 3) the different union became better at collaborating among themselves, 4) the role as local union representative became attractive, 5) formal arenas for union-management collaboration was systemically followed up on all levels of the organization, and 6) labour representatives were perceived and involved as resources for development. Our findings are also supported by a joint presentation held by the top TDV manager and the top regional union representative delivered at a national government employer conference. Here they said that 1) union representatives are invited as an active partner in meeting with management teams at all levels in the organisation, both formally and informally, 2) higher level of trust and more focus on collaboration between the parties, 3) an organization more focusing on development issues rather than just reports and numbers, and 4) unions representatives is active in spreading correct information and culling rumours. This was perceived as particular important during a huge reorganisation starting one year after the end of the project.

Our findings show that the establishment of a PO helped the TVD to develop and expand union–management relations and to move towards a more cooperative approach. This included more acceptance for union work, with no specific additional funding. Due to the increase in formal and informal meetings, the hours spent on working with union matters were substantially increased. In hindsight, we reflect upon the starting point for the expanded cooperation. As illustrated, the cooperation between the partners were limited, but we also realise that this does not mean that the relationship between them was characterized by conflicts. Also, there was a sense of trust between the partners, which was essential in the process of establishing a cooperation beyond traditional bargaining. Our reflections may have implications for which conditions such cooperation can be developed and succeed. In the following section, we discuss the new procedures connected to union–management cooperation and a clearer developmental focus.

5.3. New procedures for organisational development

Our case exemplifies how national regulations and agreements reveal little about the actual conduct of employment relations (Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018). Like the workforce more generally in Norway, the TVD had a high degree of union membership. Nevertheless, we found little evidence there of the cooperative efforts described by Eikeland (2012). However, we observed that participation in the AR project and being part of a PO led to the development of arenas, or dancefloors, where cooperation between unions and management became possible. During the project, union representatives were also given a clearer role within the formal organisational and managerial processes. One of the managers commented on how unions participated in strategic and managerial processes at local levels:

"It has become clear that the union representatives take part in the strategic and management processes in our local area. The commitment has increased and now there are people who actually *want* to become union representatives" (Level 2 manager).

According to this manager, the increased involvement of union representatives also increased the level of commitment in the organisation; in particular, there was increased interest in becoming a union representative. Basically, the work in the PO enhanced the union representatives' position since it was obvious that their engagement would be important and taken into consideration by the management. This development resulted in a shift towards new perspectives and awareness connected to roles and interests, moving towards a perspective that aligns with the notion that unions and managers do have similar goals, values, and interests, and that such agreements can create a supportive environment when developing workplaces (Heckscher, 2001; Kochan et al., 2009; Oeij et al., 2015).

Another manager spoke about how the expanded union–manager relations and the project activities allowed them to shift their focus in their working life:

"I have noticed that we have moved beyond the huge focus on production. I feel that we share experiences and talk to each other more than we did before. We focus less on crunching numbers" (Level 2 manager).

By moving beyond a production focus and by sharing knowledge and experiences, the partners moved towards knowledge production and were able to reflect on current and future practices. This shift is important to provide a long-term and organisation-wide perspective (Finnestrand, 2011), and provide the unions with a voice in matters that concern the future of both the organisation and employees (Oeij et al., 2015). As another manager reported, the ability to view matters from different perspectives and to work towards joint goals made their work easier, which is in line with the ideas behind PO literature (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974) and the ideals of AR (Greenwood & Levin, 2007):

"It's become easier, I think. We have the same goals […] It's easier to make decisions. We are able to view things from different sides. There is no blueprint. We can discuss things together" (Level 3 manager).

The notion of a lack of "blueprints" indicates the difference between a PO and the OO (Hawk & Zand, 2014). Within the OO, the structures, procedures, and routines previously prevented or made it challenging to become aware of longer-term and intangible matters. Hence, by using facilitators and discussion, the PO provided something different to the blueprints and highly regulated practices with which the organisation was familiar. By working in a joint effort on the project activities, based on jointly acquired theoretical understanding, it was apparent that the activities and outcomes in the PO had an impact and were being transferred to the OO. This is illustrated by the experiences of the union representative:

"You get used to being the grey ghost who is put in the corner. All of a sudden, people start asking for your opinion. That's not something we are used to. Now, you are out up front and supposed to speak your mind. Of course, you will grow from that. It's a personal development" (Union rep).

This experience can be viewed as a shift, where the union representatives are now invited to dance with the managers, and maybe even taking the lead in certain dance routines. The newfound procedures for cooperation and the expanded relationships can also benefit the organisation as a whole and promote organisational reflection and development on behalf of the collective. For instance, the AR literature recommends looking closely at the workplace and practices in a joint effort, because this can generate knowledge production and solutions closely connected to and based on participants' own experiences and needs (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Our findings also show that the PO helped the TVD to navigate around bureaucratic barriers, and that it enabled participants to create new procedures with a shift in focus away from the traditional hierarchy solely focusing on production and accounting, towards cooperation and collaborative OD.

6. Conclusions

The use of PO in organisational development builds on many years of experience from AR projects in the Nordic countries that involve union representatives and managers in various companies from the aftermath of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy program and up to today (see for example Levin, 2002). Many of these projects have contributed to improved lines of communication in the company (Finnestrand, 2011), better cooperation between the various trade unions (Ravn & Øyum, 2020) and improved development and implementation of new technology (Claussen, Haga & Ravn, 2021). The problem is that virtually all these attempts have been made within the private sector. The findings of our AR within a Norwegian public organisation show that the PO created a dancefloor that was less confined by bureaucratic barriers associated with public sector and on which unions and managers could dance and co-create new relations, enhance their roles, and shift focus towards developing

the workplace in a joint effort. Although working life and union–management cooperation is highly regulated in Scandinavia, a regulated partnership with formal agreements and structures might lack the dynamics that promote exploratory and reflective norms. In this case, both managers and unions were more development oriented and had a more defined role by the end of the AR project. We argue that this was possible, mostly, because the AR project and management seminars ran parallel to the formal, large, public organisation. Our findings may also be relevant across sectors, particularly for highly bureaucratic organisations, as collective ways for organisations to develop and improve practices in a parallel structure may be relevant for a wide range of organisations. Also, for other organisations to initiate such efforts, we observe that a minimum level of trust and a manageable level of conflict is required.

Another important argument here is how union representation made important contributions to the organisation in general and to OD in particular. The unions provided effective communication structures and promoted trust and commitment within the TVD. In addition, they provided an organisation-wide and long-term perspective that resulted in a more distinct focus on development. Organisational development leading to more effective processes is clearly one form of public innovation. Ultimately, ensuring the direct participation of all employees is more demanding on resources and time, which was also the experience in this AR project, as local pilot projects were carried out as an additional part of the project. Rational reasons for why employees did not participate actively in the AR project were studied in a previous paper (Lebesby & Benders, 2020)).

Our findings have three practical implications. First, when broad participation and flat structures are sought, a PO is a legitimate intervention to facilitate better communication, especially within public organisations. Second, the PO can function as a relations- and network-building structure, and it can be used as a tool for enhancing cooperation between unions and managers. Third, AR approaches and the purpose of POs can expand the cooperative effort, help participants develop their roles, and increase commitment to organisational development.

Our findings contribute to the industrial relations literature by proposing POs as a tool for building relations between unions and managers in a public organisation. Our paper also contributes to the PO literature by proposing that the inclusion of unions in a PO can be crucial when attempting to transfer outcomes into the OO. As previously mentioned, literature on public sector development rarely discuss the union role (Bie-Drivdal, 2019; 2021; Kjellberg, 2021). Hence, this paper contributes to, and might inspire, future discussions about union–management development projects in public sector organisations. It is a good example of how organisations can facilitate indirect participation, and the broad involvement of employees in OD matters can in turn result in new practices and innovations. However, an apparent limitation is the establishment of an arena that also facilitates direct participation. Our observation is that while unions and managers participate on the dancefloor, the employees are, at best, waiting on the outside of the dancing venue. Hence, it is

recommended that future research studies how action researchers and practitioners can include a greater number of ordinary employees in PO efforts and how that will impact organisational development in the long run.

Concluding remarks

Ideally, all prospective parties should be invited to the dancefloor and be viewed as qualified dancers. In this paper we observed that the dancefloor served the purpose of an arena for collective development. However, the final dance routine is to be carried out within the OO without the guidance of facilitators or friendly outsiders.

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