

## Participatory action research with social workers in Greenland

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### Abstract

*Decades of quantitative social science research in Greenland have documented a number of social problems. However, contrary to Canadian Inuit research, for example, there has been no participatory research conducted into the concrete circumstances that social workers deal with or the social challenges they face on a daily basis. This article draws on an action research project that took place between 2010 and 2014. The project revealed the social workers' disempowerment in their work, and lack of collective network of professional colleagues at the workplace, or from their trade union. The action research was developed to facilitate the establishment of a social workers' union in order to establish a sense of unity and empowerment for the profession.*

**Keywords:** Greenland, action research, empowerment, social work, social planning,

As an arctic country, Greenland has witnessed severe social problems during the last 50 years. Statistically, it is one of the most violent countries in the world, with a depressing world record in suicides. Seven per cent of children live away from their biological parents in foster homes or institutions. Social workers are the most important profession dealing with these issues. Prior to this action research project, social workers were a disorganized group without a trade union, public voice or representation in Greenland's social policy institutions. The empowerment of the social workers also means stronger advocacy on behalf of the most marginalized citizens and unheard minority groups (e.g. children, young citizens and homeless people).

#### Facts about Greenland 2014

Population: 56,282

Capital: Nuuk 16,818

Born outside Greenland 12.2 %

Religions: Evangelical Lutheran

Languages: Greenlandic, Danish

(Statistics Greenland, 2014)

Fig. 3.1 Greenland



For decades, most of the social research about Greenland has been in the form of quantitative studies of social problems. There has been a lack of sociological and transformative knowledge about the conditions and practices of social work.

This article's point of departure is an action research project that was conducted between 2010 and 2014 (Arnfjord, 2014). The aim was to facilitate professional capacity building of the social workers in Greenland (Arnfjord and Hounsgaard, 2013).

The article begins with a summary of the social challenges and the institutional and organizational conditions for doing social work. Thereafter, the

project's positions within the action research and empowerment tradition are outlined, including a review of earlier action and participatory research in Greenland. We then present the methodology and the steps in the action research process. Finally, the results, implications and recommendations of the project are presented.

## Research about social conditions in Greenland

Over the last decade, research about social problems has increased, dealing with issues such as child welfare (Banerjee, 2007), child poverty (Schnohr, Nielsen and Wulff, 2007), children in at-risk-families (Kristensen, Christensen and Baviskar, 2008) and the health of school children (Nielsen and Arnfjord, 2015). The latest Welfare Commission report provided following statement 'A majority of the population is doing well, but a large minority is having a difficult time' (Skatte- og Velfærdskommissionens betænkning, 2011, p. 3) [Our translation].

The need for renewed attention towards the social workers' profession should be viewed in the light of significant challenges in the area of social welfare:

- 7% of the country's children are removed from their families and are living elsewhere.
- The birth-rate and the abortion rate are at the same level. In 2010, 869 children were born and 858 abortions were carried out
- According to the WHO, the suicide rate in Greenland is at a world record high of 11 per 10,000 per year.
- The rate of reported violence per 10,000 inhabitants ranks Greenland (128 in 2009) higher than the US (43), France (53) and Turkey (29).

(Clarke, 2013)

These are significant social problems that have a deep impact on a population of 56,000. This impact is a strong incentive to focus more attention on social interventions that aim to provide sustainable solutions in practice. In the following section, we will briefly outline our version of action research as research that facilitates empowerment.

## Action research and empowerment

Action research is based on democratic and inclusive values that support collective action and social innovation (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). What makes action research interesting is that the target group and agents of change are invited to participate actively in the design of the research and its progress towards completion. The goal of action research is that the production of knowledge contributes to social mobilization, democratic development and positive change of the field that is (action) researched. In other words, action research links *understanding* with change/*transformation* of the world. One of the founding fathers of action research, Kurt Lewin, stated that 'The best way to understand something is to change it' (Lewin, 1946, p. 22).

The tradition of action research puts forward a set of goals to create knowledge about strategies, methods and actions thus changing society through mobilization and critical awareness. In this way, action research is science where the concepts of empowerment are automatically implemented (Arnford, 2014). Combinations of empowerment and action research have been implemented in various ways. The American sociologist Erik Olin Wright calls his approach emancipatory social science. His basic research design is divided into three phases: (1) Critical Diagnosis, (2) Building Sustainable Alternatives and (3) Transformative Processes (Wright, 2010).

This first step is concerned with social and political justice or democratic egalitarianism in Wright's terms – equal opportunities for people to take action and transform a problematic situation into an acceptable one. The way to achieve this transformation is through the process of building a sustainable alternative, which is step two. This is a utopian phase of emancipatory social science. There are three aspects of social alternatives: Desirability (what we wish for), Viability (what we can sustain) and Achievability (what we can succeed with). The second step is to operationalize changes through practical action and experiments. According to Wright, critical studies should not end with visions of what could be achieved. A critical diagnosis' indication of a real practical problem deserves a substantial solution. Substance in this context is transformation and it is at the heart of this action research project.

Wright was a major inspiration for this Greenlandic project due to his focus on how to operationalize and somehow also legitimize a renewed focus on Marxist sociology. Wright's terminology provides us with a vocabulary for discussing action research and its relation to governing systems. In an article in the *New Left Review*, Wright (2006) talks about three approaches to transformation: Ruptural, Interstitial and Symbiotic. These are later simplified as smashing the system (ruptural), ignoring the system (interstitial) and using the system (symbiotic). In addressing the last, which is the approach we employed in this research, Wright states:

Symbiotic transformations thus have a contradictory character to them, often taking advantage of a tension between short- and long-term effects of institutional change: in the short term, symbiotic forms of social empowerment are in the interests of elites and dominant classes; in the long term they can shift the balance of power towards broader social empowerment.

(Wright, 2006, p. 123)

As mentioned, the last approach was used in this project, as we will elaborate on further below.

More specifically Denmark has witnessed the impact of a special variation of action research, called critical utopian action research. In German, the methodology was called the *Zukunftwerkstätten* (Jungk and Müllert, 1989). It was developed in the former West Germany in the 1970s as a reaction to undemocratic urban planning. The developers Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert were looking for ways of conducting workshops that would allow participants to take an active part in the creation of their own futures. When the workshop title was translated into English, the translation underwent different forms and is, in its

current Scandinavian context through the works of Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen (2006), called Future Creating Workshops.

The Future Creating Workshop consists of three phases, however, before initiating the phases, the participants in the workshop need to agree on a theme for the workshop. In our research, the theme chosen by the social workers themselves concerned “well-being in the workplace”. The next stage progresses through three phases. The first step is the “critical” phase, where the participants apply a critical stance towards the given subject and formulate potential problems therein. The second phase is the “utopian” phase, where the idea is to think outside of the box. One way to incorporate the utopian phase is to try to imagine the positive angle of the themes from the critical phase. The last phase is called the “realisation” phase. Here, the participants return to the ideas from the utopian phase and work with those ideas that would be possible to realize. The roots of the method can be traced back to the leading figures of critical theory, namely the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who escaped from Nazi Germany and sought asylum in the USA in the 1930s and 1940s (often referred to as members of the Frankfurt School). Kurt Lewin was part of this scientific environment and is considered a founder of action research in Europe and the USA. Lewin carried out research into democratic ways of developing organizations and organizational culture (Lewin, 1946). His experiences of 1930s fascism in Europe were the origin of Lewin’s realization that democracy and the norms of democracy are not something that should be taken for granted. The cure against authoritarianism was to initiate democratic processes and develop competencies for people to take social responsibility from the bottom up, through democratic experimentations in workplaces and in communities (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006).

Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) pointed towards hope as a special form of recognition, which precedes what is yet to be. In doing so, Bloch criticized both psychoanalysis and orthodox Marxism for having forgotten the potentials of hope, dreams and fantasies by reducing them to expressions of escapism. According to Bloch, utopian flows in everyday life have the potential to create social change.

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) introduced the notion of “the power of reality” to show that people’s social imagination, what they thought was possible, was limited by the practices of everyday life. To overcome this “power of reality”, Robert Jungk (1913-1994) developed what he called a future-creating workshop, which is a methodology for the creation of social imagination and utopian future scenarios. The idea of the “future as something that just appears”, should be replaced with experiences which state that there are many possible “futures” (Jungk and Müllert, 1989)<sup>1</sup>.

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1 The future-creating workshop’s radical new way of thought and practice should surpass the existing and often scientifically proclaimed horizon of the future. The future-creating workshop consists of a critical phase, a utopian phase and ends with a realization phase, where the participants produce concrete modes of action. In a future-creating workshop, the researcher becomes a facilitator. The future-creating workshop has methodologically been developed with the intention that the participants would have the possibility to think “outside the box” and have free spaces for common social reflection, empowerment (social mobilization) and new ways of thinking.

Empowerment is a concept of change processes and strategies for a more inclusive and democratic society (Andersen, 2005). Action research can therefore be defined as research that contributes to empowerment processes:

Processes where under privileged social groups improve their abilities to create, survey and control material, social, cultural and symbolic resources. The process of awareness and capacity building which increases the participation and decision making power of citizens and may potentially lead to transformative action, which will change opportunity structures in an inclusive, more egalitarian direction.

(Andersen and Siim, 2004, p. 2)

Historically, empowerment is connected with Paulo Freire who defines it as: 'Learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of that reality' (Freire, 1974, s. 19).

In continuation of the Latin American action research tradition, the American professor Richard Levin developed an even wider definition of empowerment, which underlines the transformative nature of empowerment:

By empowerment I mean the all-round capabilities, resources, information, knowledge, self-confidence, skills, understanding, organization, and formal rights which people can use to individually and collectively decide what happens to them. I also include the mobilization of the collective imagination, intelligence, creativity, enthusiasm, courage, and energy of the people in a liberating enterprise.

(Levin, 1995, p. 208)

As a transformative paradigm, the empowerment approach has experienced a revival because of its stance against neo-liberalism (Craig and Mayo, 1995) as it centres on social mobilization, collective action, social movements and capacity building for social justice. In short, empowerment can be divided into interrelated dimensions: (1) the *objective* dimension, which refers to changes in opportunity structures e.g. social rights and institutional reforms, and (2) the *subjective* dimension of empowerment, which refers to the development of agents' "state of mind", skills and capacity to create positive change. Or as Swift and Levin put it:

In order to make it a more precise and useful concept, two central issues should be kept in mind. Empowerment: 1) refers both to the phenomenological development of a certain state of mind (e.g. feeling powerful, competent, worthy of esteem, etc.) and to the modification of structural conditions in order to reallocate power (e.g., modifying the society's opportunity structure) in other words, empowerment refers both to the subjective experience and the objective reality; and 2) is both a process and a goal.

(Swift and Levin, 1987, p. 3)

Within the empowerment tradition, it is useful to distinguish between *vertical* and *horizontal* empowerment. Vertical empowerment is about strengthening the agents (in this case, a disempowered social worker profession) in relation to economic and political centres of power at higher levels of society (i.e., local and national government) and also in relation to having a voice in political discourses. In short, vertical empowerment is about strengthening power positions outwardly and upwardly, e.g., across scale ("scale jumping")

as geographers put it). Horizontal empowerment is about trust and joint capacity building between agents on the same scale or level, i.e., in the form of alliances between citizens and social workers in a community. The demolition of mistrust, a culture of silence and the creation of network and mobilization capacity are the important elements in horizontal empowerment. Successful empowerment processes are mutually enhancing over time, and they will be developed dialectically between horizontal and vertical empowerment: The ability to act internally within a group can enhance the capacity to act outwardly, e.g., against employers, which again can strengthen the feeling of solidarity within the group. Even though empowerment strategies are often applied in practice on a community level, a group of work colleagues (the micro level of everyday life) are also about capacity building on a societal level (macro), on an organizational and institutional level (meso).

In this project, the empowerment approach was simultaneously about strengthening the social workers' professional identity by building up their trade organization internally, and strengthening their voice in the social policy field at a national level.

The Greenlandic social worker profession is represented by a united trade union (AK),<sup>2</sup> which negotiates salaries and working conditions with the employees, however AK does not have an employee representative with insight into the social workers' practices. The social workers believe that AK's lack of organization has a negative influence on their salaries, pension agreement plans and working conditions compared with other welfare professionals. Before the research collaboration, the social workers had not been visible or represented in public councils or committees. The silent voice of the social workers also meant that the profession did not advocate on behalf of marginalized groups in Greenland. Advocacy, which is linked to the concept of empowerment, is theoretically and politically well documented as a core value for a social worker (IFSW, 2004; Wilks, 2012).

In the following section, we provide a brief description of earlier action research in Greenland.

## **Review of previous action research**

At the beginning of this paper, we characterized the dominant part of social science research as "quantitative studies about misery". However, there is also a tradition for participatory research from the 1960s that is almost forgotten today, but which deserves renewed attention. Two prominent figures in the early years of research, during the development of an independent legislative framework for Greenland in the 1960s, were the progressive Danish sociologists Verner Goldschmidt and Agneta Weis Bentzon. During their research, Goldschmidt incorporated many ideas from the local population and invited the public to take part as co-researchers in the work to form new independent legislation for Greenland (Bentzon 1988). Goldschmidt drew on theories that went beyond a descriptive agenda to better understand ways to achieve social change. He referred to Ogburn

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2 Atorfillit Kattuffiat

(Ogburn 1922) and to social psychological theory that tested ways to improve social communication (Back, 1951).

In the 1980s, developments occurred in participatory research within both sociology and the community psychology tradition (Mathiesen, 1973; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). Participatory research was being done by way of community meetings, where a wide section of city residents was invited to be heard and become co-creators in strategies of change involving their cities. A language researcher described using community meetings and focus groups in an article from 1986 about citizen involvement in relation to a discussion on the survival of settlements in South Greenland (Langgaard, 1986). In 1996, a doctor used similar methods in the settlement of Kullorsuaq in North Greenland. In this latter case, there was collaboration between the doctor and the citizens about how to improve the sanitary conditions of the settlement. The point of departure was a democratic, bottom-up approach to community involvement. This had a long-term, sustainable effect on the settlement's general health level (Rosing Olsen, 1997). Afterwards, projects were carried out with a participatory oriented focus on youth and media research (Pedersen and Rygaard, 2003) regarding mobilization around the issue of health. The entire town of Qasigiannugit went to the local community centre, where the citizens participated in workshops about health, together with a group of scientists. This resulted in the planning of areas designed for recreational and physical activity around the city. Afterwards, the citizens of Qasigiannugit arranged a health week, which is still a recurring event (Nørby and Curtis, 2005).

In 2008, Greenland witnessed its largest participatory research and community building project yet, in the city of Paamiut. The project was founded upon community-based participatory research (CBPR), where group oriented capacity building, by way of focus groups and workshops, was the goal. A local research council was created, with the majority of the participants being citizens of Paamiut. The research council decided which development projects should be prioritized. The project, which was named Paamiut Asasara (Paamiut I Love You – like the I ♥ NY campaign), mobilized the entire city. The purpose of the programme was to strengthen the resilience and the psychosocial well-being of citizens, building upon locally based values. The project was a success achieved through the combined activities of citizens, business owners and municipal employees, and it resulted in the establishment of sustainable social networks, such as the creation of a network for single mothers, a business network for start-up businesses and a range of activities aimed at the city's teenagers. A central point that was raised by Peter Berliner (the research coordinator), is that a direct decline in the rates of violent incidents in the city could be observed immediately after Paamiut Asasara began (Berliner, Larsen and de Casas, 2012).

The examples above show that, although it is not the dominant research tradition, action research is not unknown in Greenland. In the following section, we outline the research design of the action research project.

## Action research as empowerment strategy for a profession

A strategic choice was made to focus on the working conditions of the social workers. The social workers' virtually powerless position was due to the fact that the profession did not follow the same traditional pattern of labour organizations as can be observed with the Greenlandic nurses and teachers. The nurses collaborate closely with the Danish Nurses' Organization (Dansk Sygeplejeråd). The schoolteachers' profession also has a long history of collaboration. A former head of section within the social services, Alfred Dam, explains the differences between the professions as a consequence of the Danish prioritization of developments within the school and health system relative to the social service system:

The violent tuberculosis epidemic, the need for housing and technological need for an expansion of the educational system led Greenland to mobilize its forces around these areas. At the same time, a separation was established between the state and the national treasury. After this, the social service sector was strictly a Greenlandic matter. Even though this was the correct disposition, it forced the social service sector in that decade [1960s] into disharmony with the general development in society.

(Dam, 1968, p. 257) [Our translation]

This might explain why the social workers did not follow the same pattern as the nurses and teachers and achieve a robust labour organization. The special challenges confronting the Greenlandic social workers are also due to the fact that the social workers are dispersed across enormous distances, where they work alone and are often faced with major decisions that may have a huge impact on the lives of their social clients.

In spite of the expressed need for more research that should be conducted closer to practice, the majority of resources are still spent on large surveys. The lack of a change orientation has created research fatigue towards "more of the same" research. In 1986, the Minister for Culture, Church and Education, Stephen Heilmann, said:

There have been a lot of researchers who have researched just about the same topics with the same people as research objects. We are only 50,000 people up here, and maybe it is not exactly the same questions we are being asked, but we are being asked this and that and we are almost never told what the research is used for.

(Sachs, 1986, p. 4)

Former research advisor to the home rule government, sociologist Mogens Holm, also argued that research should be changed from its objectifying nature to be more inclusive and change-oriented. An objectifying research approach was initiated by the colonial power, with significant career benefits for those Danish researchers with access to Greenland. Holm writes about the natural sciences:

Denmark has had an advantage with its access to Greenland and has gained the highest recognition in Danish research, perhaps only surpassed by the works of Nils Bohr in nuclear physics.

(Holm, 2000) [Our translation]



In 2006, Member of Parliament Henriette Rasmussen wrote:

Scientists from Denmark and many other countries came, observed and went home to analyse, publish and merit themselves. The Greenlandic society did not get any information about the results.

(Rasmussen, 2006)

The statement is followed by more optimistic expectations towards the future, and that the scientific community and Greenlandic public authorities were planning to have a more transparent relationship.

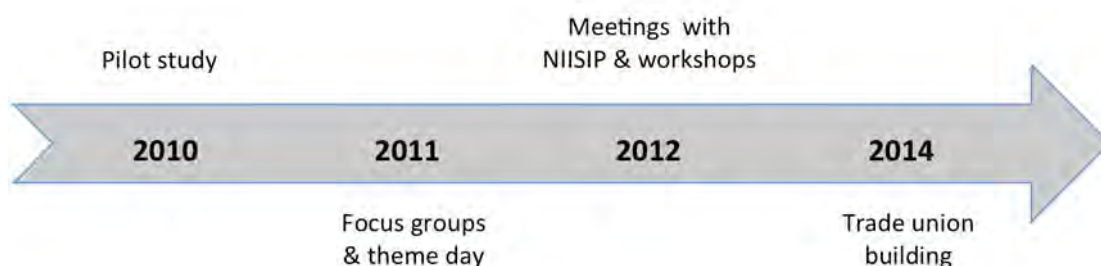
This short overview of the history of research in Greenland can be seen as a wish from the Greenlandic society to experiment with other types of research focused on positive change. This understanding became a point of departure for this action research project with the social workers, which evolved in two phases. It initially began in the municipal practice of the social service department and later it relied more on a nationwide professional and labour organizational perspective.

### **The disorganized and frustrated municipal social workers**

The action research project started as a pilot study in 2010. In 2011, we hosted focus groups and held a theme day. In 2012, we held more workshops and began holding meetings with a small group of social workers called NIISIP, who wanted to start a trade union and by 2014, we were engaged in developing a trade union. All this is illustrated in the timeline below.

The initial pilot study back in 2010 was an explorative, qualitative study to encourage the social workers to talk, through interviews and focus groups, about how they perceived their professional day.

Fig. 3.2: Action research time line



The questions were open-ended and focused on topics such as their daily tasks, supervision, the clients, management and the organization of the social work. The project started in the municipality of Sermersooq in the capital Nuuk. The department in Nuuk employed 15 social workers and one manager, all of whom were interviewed. Later, the social workers participated in focus groups and a theme day about how recognition is both about creating a constructive working environment colleague-to-colleague, and about the relation between the citizen and the public employee. The most important results were that

the social workers described their working life as being atomized. They handled a large number of very critical cases alone, without any steady management or any robust institutional framework. This led to a high level of job turnover, because many of the social workers could not realize their ambitions of supplying the necessary help in a system that could not offer the much-needed support for clients such as a mother-and-child home, housing for the homeless or relief care services. Other findings were about the unsatisfactory levels of salaries, stress, threats, violence and a feeling of professional insecurity based on the fact that they were all working individually and not as a group (Arnford Hounsgaard, 2015). A solid understanding from this first phase was that the social workers did not refer to any form of overall (meta) professional identity or affiliations. They clearly requested a professional organization.

Fig. 3.3 - From a workshop



These conclusions about the nature of the problems became the point of departure for the next phase, which involved a future-creating workshop.

In 2011, we held a future-creating workshop in the municipality and raised a range of issues that exceeded what was solvable internally in the social service department. After the critical phase, a list was produced, where the social workers prioritized among key points. This included some critical statements about the managerial situation, problems with knowledge sharing and difficulties with the administration of social services to citizens with special needs.

The utopian phase is the innovative core of the workshop. The point of departure was to create free spaces where the participants could openly discuss the key points from the critical phase. Free space as a term originates from the utopian idea of an uninterrupted

space for thinking freely about problem solutions (Bladt and Nielsen, 2013). During the utopian phase, many different suggestions arose. They ranged from a multitude of help services that should support the options for creating tailored solutions for the clients, to better pay and working conditions. One specific suggestion, which caused a lot of laughter, was the idea of getting muscular, attractive bodyguards (the group of social workers consisted mainly of women). The utopia concerning the bodyguards was linked to the potential risk of encountering violence when performing home visits. Coping with insecurity was clearly a part of the job. Threats of violence were something that most of the participants were familiar with and was a feature of their work life.

The suggestions dealing with threats on the job, a stronger support system, salary and working conditions, were categorized during the realization phase. These were themes for which it would be difficult to find solutions within the municipal department. They related to working conditions, collective agreements and labour negotiations. This required a national strategy rather than merely a local one.

## **A shift in action research strategy**

As a consequence of the conclusions from the project in the municipality, the research project "changed the scene" from the framework of the formal organization, namely the municipality, to a reshaped focus on building a national union, which had to be achieved outside the municipal system. In this new or external forum, the action research approach prioritized a facilitation of the establishment of a trade union for social workers – to help support the need for a greater level of professional, unionized awareness. It became a question of empowerment and the development of a positive power among the social workers to organize themselves and to become a voice for the socially marginalized groups (Arn fjord, 2013). A decision was made in 2012 to establish contact with a small group of social workers, who called themselves the NIISIP, in order to explore the possibilities of collaborating on empowering the professional social workers on a national level.

NIISIP were positive about the idea and, on their behalf, we commenced a series of meetings about our mutual interests and expectations. A model was suggested which would consist of a range of workshops that should revitalize the union by creating a set of values, new union regulations, increasing the member base and gaining certifiable influence in future labour negotiations.

The workshops were about the union's key political issues, during which there was a lot of brainstorming, writing on wall-charts and discussions about which ideas to prioritize. In this methodological process, we sought inspiration from Myles Horton and his work with American mid-western coal workers. Horton, like Paulo Freire, worked by facilitating meetings that were founded upon democratic principles. Horton emphasized the importance of civic rights and always had the participants' primary needs as a first priority and academic interests only as a second priority (Horton and Freire, 1990; Moyers and Horton, 1982).

## Trade union building and NIISIP's key issues

NIISIP wanted to transform the union. In practice in 2013 and 2014, it was set up with the action researcher acting as both a facilitator and as a third party to ask questions when debates came to a standstill. Typical questions were: "How would you go about doing this or doing that?" The pivotal point was the self-appointed assignment of producing a set of key issues, which could empower NIISIP as a collective unit for the social workers of Greenland. The assignment with the key issues stretched over two workshops. We discussed salary demands, educational and working conditions, improving the quality of social work and NIISIP's participation in the social-political debates in order to strengthen the voice of the profession in policy-making

After developing the key issues, the following workshops were about the future work of NIISIP. A central theme was the affiliation with AK. During the meetings, many important questions were asked. One of these was about how many social workers actually worked in the municipalities. Another question concerned the legal authority behind a statement from AK saying that NIISIP had to represent at least 50% of Greenland's social worker workforce in order to take over and lead future labour negotiations. These questions sparked new rounds of workshops about efforts to organize more social workers in the union. We set up working groups to examine these questions.

## The transformation

A revitalized union replaced the formerly existing social workers' union.

- The member base increased from 8 to 53 during the period 2012-2015. This number is very close to 50% of the social workers' workforce.
- NIISIP managed to appoint a new and improved board and updated their regulations.
- They became visible in the media through articles in the newspapers, trade journals and they appeared on TV. In 2014, NIISIP appeared 8-10 times in the national media (Duus, 2014a; Duus, 2014b; KNR, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Nuuk TV, 2014). They continue to regularly appear in the media and now, whenever a welfare-related news story comes up, there is almost always a comment featured from NIISIP, where they push the agenda for better working conditions for social workers.
- NIISIP established a website, [www.niisip.gl](http://www.niisip.gl), and became active in the social media.
- The board became empowered and began discussing trade union issues and reminded one another of the importance of the continual debate about social politics and their important role as front-line workers.
- NIISIP was asked by the government of Greenland to appoint a social worker to sit on the board of the Equal Opportunities Commission, which is a sign of public recognition.

- In January 2015, the board of NIISIP could present its members with a written and legally reviewed proposal for the upcoming labour negotiations.
- During the spring of 2015, NIISIP was invited to “the table” to begin labour negotiations with the Greenlandic Home Rule Government. They are still an active and included party to the negotiations.

## Conclusions

The knowledge achieved through the action research project is living knowledge (Montero, 2000), which the social workers have employed to empower their position. They became empowered to navigate the trade union field and social policy fields through an understanding of the importance of a professional organization. Without this unity, the results would not have been achieved.

Action research showed itself to be useful as a methodology, by ensuring that the knowledge from this project represented some of the first studies about the Greenlandic social workers’ profession. In addition, it helped to build a capacity for the social workers to take action in the future. Greenland is a small community, so action researchers need to take care to leave a good impression of how “we” work. The inspiration from Wright gave us a possibility to use a theory that allowed for a symbiotic approach – we performed work where we used the system instead of ignoring it or smashing it. By using the system, we kept a gateway open for further, much needed, studies in the future.

The strengthened capacity of the social workers expressed in the key issues of NIISIP, their media presence and their expanded board and membership numbers, will have a sustainable effect. In this way, the action research approach demonstrated that it is more than an alternative research approach. It’s a viable approach that succeeded in creating results that works for the long-term benefit of the Greenlandic welfare society.

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