

Action research with pastoralists in East Africa: a dialogue with bureaucracy and power

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Participation is not facilitated, it happens. Mine is a philosophical and experiential perspective drawn from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. I've been looking at the powers of conversation oriented towards understanding; watching as the political field shifts and the things we do within it adjust. For me, social justice demands that we change the vocabulary of possibility. When this happens, our encounters are fed by new powers of argument, question and agreement. The change comes not when you persuade, but when you strengthen the argument of the other.

I have been working for many years with mobile pastoralist people in East Africa living in the savannah drylands of the Great Rift Valley and the Sahel. I've been following and engaging with them as they define and demand a new vocabulary for their societies. They have been leading a conversation that brings their tradition and philosophy into encounter with bureaucracy, economy and violent politics. I take part in it and question it. I watch how it reproduces and how it puts old certainties at risk. It's a form of action research that is almost invisible in the sense of not being methodologicalised. Nonetheless it is deliberate and influential and its basis lies in philosophy.

For the session I propose to give a brief provocation, and follow it with some invitations involving encounter, 'strengthening the argument of the other' and experiencing what happens within the flow of a short conversation.