

'You'll laugh. You'll grimace in recognition. You'll applaud the plucky little band who tried to bring participation home. *The Beast of Bureaucracy* should be required reading for everyone who works in a development bureaucracy, particularly those at the top.' – Louise Fortmann, University of California at Berkeley

'Brilliantly conceived and beautifully crafted, *The Beast of Bureaucracy* holds up a mirror for all who work in aid bureaucracies and celebrates the courage to be "dangerously different". A gripping, entertaining and therapeutic read ... a must-read for all who work in bureaucracies, not only in aid.' – Robert Chambers, IDS

# The Beast of Bureaucracy

## and Other Tales from Valhalla

This little book tells the tale of an unusual organisational learning process in Valhalla, a Nordic development bureaucracy. Known for being a people-friendly development partner, Valhalla was one of the first bilateral donor agencies to promote people's participation in development. But for those who work there, how to put participation into practice in their everyday work isn't as obvious as it may seem. For, as they discover, it means tangling with the Beast of Bureaucracy ...



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# The Beast of Bureaucracy



## and Other Tales from Valhalla

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Cover image drawn by bureaucrat during a participatory exercise

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**T**his little book tells the story of an unconventional project that happened in a time before Results-Based Management. Its tales are set in a place that only exists in memories of times past, and filled with characters who no longer do what they did in the days when these events took place. And yet the world described in this story lives on, in the new open-plan offices with the latest in interior design, in the documents and decisions that are the stuff of everyday life in a large development bureaucracy – and in the struggles with the Beast of Bureaucracy that continue to be waged by those who want to see their efforts bring about a better, fairer world for all.

The experiences we describe here are all real enough. They took place as part of an organisational learning initiative that brought a group of desk officers from different departments together to enquire into what would help close the gap between fine-sounding words about poor people's participation in development and actual practice. Composed as a series of episodes in the life of this group, who met every couple of months over the course of a year in those long-distant times, our

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aim in this book is less to fictionalise the factual than to evoke some of the feelings and frustrations that animate these struggles, and with this reveal the nature of this Beast.

The tales we tell here tell a different story to that usually told about bureaucrats. These are stories that show the fiery advocate within the apparently icy bureaucrat whose creativity is frozen in electronic planning systems, financial guidelines, in ideas about efficiency and the proper way to act. These are stories that reveal dilemmas over what kind of actions to take in a context where small, almost imperceptible, acts may make more difference than grander, more visible, gestures. And these are also stories of the rules that enable, but can also come in the way of, achieving the institution's own goals. They are tales told from our particular viewpoints, as the instigators and co-conspirators in a process that became by turns more and more unconventional as we tangled with the Beast of Bureaucracy and sought new and different ways of taming it. And just as we've given our principal characters names from the Nordic pantheon, so too we have adopted names of legend and myth to write ourselves, and others, like Sol and Vor, who worked with us, into this tale. As Cerridwen, Freja, Maya and Brid, we are also part of the story.

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We seek in these stories to show bureaucrats as people: as those whose daily struggles with the Beast of Bureaucracy leave them with little time and energy to step back and reflect on the kinds of issues our learning group grappled with; as those whose work is inspired less by a love for the arts of bureaucracy than with a passionate desire to make a difference in the lives of the millions who suffer poverty and discrimination; and as a particular group of people who dared to break with established conventions and thaw the ice, shake Valhalla out of its grooves and prompt those who work there to think and maybe even do a little bit differently.

### Cerridwen, Freja, Maya and Brid



## Välkommen till Valhalla

**E**nter Valhalla headquarters in Nordstad as a foreign visitor and you will be struck by how warm, bright and well co-ordinated the colours are that beam at you from the curtains, the cloth-covered seats on the chairs or the cloth-bound files on the shelves in each office. How attractive it looks with all the matching blonde wooden shelves and desks. How nice the designer lamps are that hang over those lovely big tables in the coffee rooms in each department. You will be surprised to realise that there was no need to put on a suit and tie. The person who comes down to greet you after you've signed in at the reception is very likely to be dressed in casual trousers, a blouse in bright colours and to wear heavy ethnic jewellery. This is, after all, Nordia; and she is most likely to be a woman.

As a Nordian, you will know that you are in Valhalla because there are always larger-than-life photos on display in the public area of this building portraying African women radiating with confidence having participated in a Valhalla-sponsored activity which has given them access to micro-finance, clean water or reproductive health.

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But, as a Nordan, the colour scheme, designer lamps and pale wood will also tell you that you've entered state agency territory. Had you chosen to walk down a nearby street – where the National Public Board of Health is located – you would have found yourself in a strikingly similar office. Only there wouldn't have been African women beaming at you but posters about the dangers of smoking or the joys of safer sex.

The office of a Valhalla desk officer is usually big enough only for her own desk and a visitor's chair. The walls are covered with shelves on which you will find long rows of identical files for each project or activity for which she is responsible. Most desk officers try to personalise their office space and the participants in this story have all added their own individual touches. Vidar has beautiful photos of historical buildings, Heimdall has gadgets for fishing in the Far East hanging on his wall, Hildir has a distinctly Central American feel to her space with her own personal coffee cup bearing the message 'men are only good for one thing – and how important is parallel parking anyway?' Hermod's desk is barely visible underneath heaps of paper and shows no sign of any personal interests, while on Lofn's desk everything is neatly filed away so that your attention is drawn to the photos of her children.

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And finally Freja, with her shells from the shores of the Indian Ocean and her little cone-headed Zimbabwean stone sculpture reminding her of times long past.

But even if the warm colours, the *figus benjamina* trees in the big pots, the fish swimming peacefully in their tanks and the casually dressed bureaucrats on each floor all contribute to giving an illusion of this being an easy-going place where a better future is being built for the world's poor, there should be no mistaking the seriousness that marks the way people go about their daily work. A look at the Valhalla intranet tells us the story behind the smiling larger-than-life African woman in the photographs, the story of what these same bureaucrats are supposed to know and how they are supposed to work. We will share with those of you who do not know a place like Valhalla, three authentic, but edited, clips selected from dozens to be found on Valhalla's intranet on one particular day – and what they tell us about what goes on in the belly of the Beast of Bureaucracy.

These are the kind of announcements that Valhalla staff find as they switch on their computers each morning. For the Nordstad-based desk officer, her computer is her main instrument in the fight against poverty and oppression. She can download useful documents setting out

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### **Water commission formed for southern Africa (News Item)**

Eight countries in southern Africa, that share the drainage basin of the Zambezi river, have signed an agreement for a joint water commission. This institution is to co-ordinate water usage in an area about three times as large as Nordia and thus becomes one of the largest permanent co-operative river basin projects in the world.

Almost one half of the African population lacks access to water and sanitation. Drought and flooding also make food production unreliable. To overcome the water crisis, institutions are needed to ensure that water resources are put to the best possible use. The new institution, to be known as the Zambezi River Basin Commission, is a real breakthrough in that it should lead to long-term improvements in the lives of the tens of millions of people who live in the area. Eight different countries have come together in organising the project, while Valhalla and other donors have provided financial backing to the tune of 35 million kronur. Of this, Nordia has provided 14 million kronur, the support being directly linked to a three-year contract. The river basin commission is officially brought into being at a ceremony to be held on the 13th July, in Botswana.

### **Invitation to Public Financial Management Workshop for Valhalla staff**

The policy of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Valhalla is that the use of broad programme support (budget support and sector programme support) to contribute to the implementation of poverty reduction strategies of partner countries should increase. This means that funds

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will increasingly be disbursed to and monitored in the recipient's own financial management.

A condition for this is that the recipient's financial management system(s) works with sufficient quality and coverage. One of Valhalla's roles is to assess whether that is the case, and to contribute to the improvement of such systems. The Director General recently decided that 'public financial management' should be a priority and a focus area for Valhalla within the framework of the growing co-operation around programme support. The Director General also decided that all Valhalla staff working directly with development co-operation programmes – based in Nordstad and field offices – should receive training in public financial management during the coming two–three year period

### **Template related to evaluations**

#### *Useful definitions*

Evaluation: '— an evaluation is a careful and systematic retrospective assessment of the design, implementation, and results of development activities' (Valhalla's Evaluation Policy)

An evaluation can involve one or more aspects of projects, programmes and policies that are in progress or completed. It can also be an assessment of one or more aspects of how Valhalla, or organisations that are supported by Valhalla, plan, design and/or evaluate projects, programmes or policies.



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guidelines for the approval and transfer of funds, and she is required to enter notice of such transactions into the electronic financial planning system. She can call up templates that allow her to encode the funding decisions that enable the giving of development co-operation money in the appropriate bureaucratic form. And computers give access to the external world, through articles on the intranet, internet searches for information to assist the making of funding decisions, through emails from prospective 'partners' seeking funding or from members of the Nordian public seeking information.

Over the years, Valhalla has financed research and development to promote institutional learning on participation within Nordia and in institutions abroad, such as at the Globe Credit. For those working at Valhalla's Nordstad headquarters, the lives of poor people can seem very distant from the paperwork and meetings about paperwork that make up much of their everyday working lives. So when one day an advert appeared on the intranet inviting them to a course on participation at the Institute for Druidic Sophistry in Albion, it seemed like an attractive proposition. It was a place that many had read about in its authoritative publications but never had the chance to actually visit.

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For Freja, the socio-cultural adviser of Valhalla, charged with the difficult task of securing some purchase within this organisation for greater popular participation in development, such a course was more than just another mainstreaming activity. It was the beginning of something completely different.

## Becoming *Lagom*

None who answered Freja's advert expected to become *Lagom* – the Nordan name the group came to know themselves by, meaning 'just enough, not too little and not too much.' What they did expect was to be trained by Experts from Albion. The aim of our project was to make better sense of, and perhaps begin to close the gap between, what Valhalla's policies said about 'participation' and what actually happened in practice. Our ideas about what we would actually do were still provisional. Although Hermod had voiced suspicions at the very start that the group were to be 'guinea-pigs', no-one could really have anticipated what we were to do together.

Freja was the spider in the web, the one who called the group together. The people she invited ran the gamut of those you might expect to find in Valhalla. Picture Vidar: his foot wedged high on his knee, leaning back into his tilted chair as he described a row of toilets in a village square in Africa, built by virtue, or perhaps in spite of, a ridiculously long participatory process and Hildir, leaning forward, her eyes flashing with cynical

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humour, telling of her dilemma with a bridge at the bend in a Central American river, built miles from its more logical spot, for the sake of a small village. Picture Heimdall, describing with frustration his meeting with a fisherman on the Mekong Delta whose capricious and now poisoned waters were controlled by a distant multinational authority which claimed to be doing all the right 'participatory' things and Hermod, leaping up to the whiteboard, making a joke and then drawing diagrams of Valhalla's strategy-making structure, pointing out how impervious it was to participation of anyone but the elite. Or Lofn, who would quietly protest with a wisdom that could so easily be cast into the shadows as flashes of light and heat crackled in the group's deliberations.

Then there were the others who facilitated, cajoled and conspired with the group in some of its wilder ideas, who came from outside Valhalla. There was Maya, the non-Nordian 'Nordian researcher' whose role was always in doubt, and whose beams of acute insight would occasionally bring the group to an astonished halt. There was Sol, who brought wisdom from years of working as a university-based consultant for Valhalla and whose calm, wise presence helped us all to think. There was Vor, who worked with the group for a short time at the beginning, and helped us think

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about the incongruence of Valhalla's policies. Then, finally, there was Cerridwen and Brid, considered to be Experts from the renowned Institute of Druidic Sophistry in Albion, flying in at regular intervals for intense doses of *Lagom*, and puzzling all the time about the Beast of Bureaucracy that they were getting to know.

There are several possible beginnings but the most decisive one was before the group had been named *Lagom*, when eight bureaucrats who wanted to know what it meant to deliver this ideal of 'participation' huddled together with the Experts from Albion in the insalubrious lobby of one of those placeless chain hotels in Brighton, bemoaning the stale biscuits in the room and the pervasive smell of damp. (This was, after all, Albion, far from the civilised comforts of Nordia).

We began to talk, in turn, about what being in a learning group on participation might be about. Round and round the group we went, listening and talking and listening. Our discussion soon became woven with a rich array of water metaphors: from swimming to drowning, from deep waters to having to do the requisite number of lengths to win the race. The group began to voice their differences.

The more we talked, the more difficult it seemed to pin down what participation might

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mean and what implications any given form of participation might actually have in practice. The more we circled around the concept of participation, the more our conversations turned to everyday life in Valhalla and how disconnected Valhalla's policies on participation were from the actual decisions and documents that desk officers had to deal with each day. In the weeks and months to come, this gap was to become clearer, while ways of bridging it continued to elude us all.

Amid promises to avoid *floskler* – fluffy platitudes and empty rhetorical phrases – to be smart and sharp and just-enough-but-not-too-much, the group became *Lagom*. It was, in retrospect, significant that this, the affectionate moniker adopted by the group, was bestowed by Vidar in the pub after the first meeting and never really formally decided upon by the group as a whole. *Lagom* offered a tantalising space – one in which each person could find something different, do something different, even perhaps be something different from that which they were in the space of the everyday.

The group was woven together with a disparate collection of wants and worries: of spending too much time talking, of spending too little time thinking, of having a structure, of not having any structure, of being forced to swim, of simply

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treading water and of drowning in the depths. It became clear that it was going to be impossible to please everybody. Hermod put his finger on it, wryly observing that all the doers will think they have no time, and the thinkers will make it more complicated... And so it was.

## The Event

During our first meeting back in Nordstad, when everybody was still flushed with excitement at being involved in something innovative and different, *Lagom* decided that they had to find a way of communicating all their anticipated learning to other staff at Valhalla. It was usual practice in Valhalla to hold seminars to present ‘findings’, and there was a vague, unformed, expectation that this is what *Lagom* would also do. It was October and the Nordin nights were drawing in and whatever form the presentation was to take, it needed to happen fairly soon.

Months later, in April the following year, the elevator vestibules of Valhalla were covered by posters with photos of well-known Valhalla characters from the 1970s entitled ‘in the head of a Valhalla-ite’. These unconventional invitations were to entice as many staff as possible to come to the basement late on a Thursday afternoon. The posters made a promise of drinks but the rest was left up to the imagination of the reader.

And people came. One after another, they found their way down to the big Valhalla exercise

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room way below the streets of busy central Nordstad. Within a very short time, over a hundred people – managers, support staff and desk officers from all age groups – had gathered to find out what on earth these posters were all about.

What they found was a sparsely lit room. The huge mirror covering one of the walls had been decorated with Christmas lights. On it were charts of how much Valhalla had spent on development since its inception in the 1960s, how many people Valhalla had employed in the field throughout this time and what had been said about participation. People were asked to write their own memories of significant events at any point in time on Post-its and put them up on the wall, creating a time-line.

In another corner, a video was running with images of people at Valhalla stating the words that they associated with participation – ‘grassroots’, ‘something good’, ‘democracy’, ‘an impossible mission’. On a washing line, photos of a Valhalla officer taken every day at the same time were hung next to the billboards from that day of the biggest Nordian daily newspaper. The officer was usually found next to his computer whilst the billboards shouted out the angst of the world. The fridge was covered with ‘fridge poetry’, using the vocabulary of bureaucratic life: everyone was encouraged to create ‘Valhalla poetry’.

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Valhalla and Nordia are characterised by *utredningar* (‘inquiries’) and seriousness when it comes to presenting results and problems. Yet those supposedly serious bureaucrats participated whole-heartedly in the creation of poetry and a common history with a glass of wine in one hand (paid for by the foreigners in the group as the Nordian State does not allow such expenses) and a pink Post-it in the other. Many were astonished with the messages that could be found in the time-line, how money spent on development had dramatically gone up at the exact same point that the number of staff in the field had started an equally dramatic decline. Or how different the ideas inspiring the agency’s work had been during those early years compared with the present day. And they smiled at all those crazy 1970s hair-dos.

Framed by the twinkling Christmas lights that lit up the room, we could see that from 1965 to 1975 recollections brought up phrases like ‘solidarity’, ‘okay for women to wear trousers’, ‘all women were called Mrs’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘aid will do the trick’, ‘liberation’, ‘sandals’, ‘belief that the written word can change the world’, ‘Nordian low-income *utredning*’.

The next decade was marked by ‘more coffee-breaks’, ‘we don’t make the priorities, *they* do!’, ‘Valhalla cheers for Mugabe’, ‘individualism’,

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‘goodbye to the goodness’, ‘from project to sector’, ‘no talking to the press’.

Something that seemed to have started in the early 1980s continued into the following decade with messages of ‘development pessimism’, ‘on the recipient’s terms (but we don’t believe in it any longer)’, ‘neo-liberalism’, ‘cut-backs’, ‘structural adjustment’, ‘debt relief’, ‘partnership’, ‘got a computer – hello stress’, ‘no smoking at Valhalla’, ‘a minister of development who supports development but not Valhalla’ – references to what older staff regarded as the ‘Dark Age of Valhalla’ of the 1980s and 1990s.

Then the present picture came into view: ‘more stress’, ‘development fatigue’, ‘masculinity’, ‘fungibility performance...’, ‘economic, social and cultural rights’, ‘more emails’, ‘the return of the UN’, ‘beautiful words’, ‘we have to learn to make priorities’, ‘the right to participation’, ‘panic how to spend as much money as possible with as little effort as possible’, ‘training in rhetoric’, ‘I’ve quit!’

Still high on the exhilaration of having pulled off the Event, *Lagom* gathered together the following day in the bright artificial light of the basement room. The Post-its had fallen on the floor and the display now looked rather tatty. We asked each other: “Well then? Where now?”

As we sat analysing what people had said and

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how they had reacted, sharing stories of how a senior official had arrived – furious at such apparent flippancy, only to become totally engaged in telling her own story of change in Valhalla – and as we exchanged snatches of conversation we’d overheard, we felt a strange mixture of thrill at our own brilliance and daring and fear that we really had gone too far, been too obscure, and lost those we’d tried to reach in the process. We had held an Event, a Happening, with the kind of lighting and lingering questions you might find in the Modern Museum of Art but was it the right thing for *Lagom* to do and was it the right thing to do at Valhalla?

## Att Våga Flyga? Daring to Fly?

The road leading to the Event was bumpy. There had been little evidence of the consensus form of decision-making for which Nordia was famed. The mood at planning meetings had swung from excitement to depression and uncertainty.

In the month before the Event, preparation seemed to be going full speed – video films were being made, graphs were being charted, meanings of participation collected. Cerridwen arrived in Nordstad to find out how things were progressing.

Before the meeting, Cerridwen and Maya had written down all the things we had actually achieved so far on the whiteboard. There were the interviews with heads of department, interviews with group members, the small acts, the planned division meetings, interviews by Lofn and Heimdall at their departments, Freja accosting unsuspecting people in the corridors to ask them what they thought about participation. When the meeting started, Maya asked us to write down on coloured cards what we thought the purpose of the Event was and what our message to Valhalla should be.



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Everyone began to scribble except for Vidar, who sat looking aloof and dissatisfied with life, as only Vidar can.

“I don’t think we should have the Event at all,” he said.

“Why are we having it? We have nothing to present as yet. This is a group reflecting together; it’s not really something we can share.”

Others nodded.

Lofn, who had already brought this matter up on other occasions, agreed.

“Even if we do want to present ourselves to the rest of Valhalla, is the Event the best way? The alternative may be to work through ‘small acts’, bit by bit. The Event is a huge undertaking; it might create more confusion among people about us. It makes me nervous; it might make it more difficult for us.”

Vidar continued: “This is an event aimed at stirring the pot, creating curiosity, reflections and questions – not really to present ourselves. It is one thing stirring the small pot that is us – but the big pot, Valhalla, is another thing. We could find ourselves flooded by questions and thoughts that we are unable to deal with.”

The horrible realisation dawned that *Lagom* really did have too little to say in the ways that things usually get said (and ignored) at Valhalla.

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Panic began to mount, in ripples and then waves: “Why are we going through all of this?” “What are people going to think of us?”

These doubts and uncertainties allowed the group to discuss and to clarify for the very first time what exactly *Lagom* was for and what we really wanted. We realised that we were not a group of experts that gave answers but people who posed questions and wanted to reach out to the rest of Valhalla. Although we realised that there was no need to take on the whole of Valhalla in order to get the organisation to take participation seriously, whatever the group did would have to be done with the rest of Valhalla. We saw that this meant understanding the history and the organisation itself, sharing and linking up with others at Valhalla, inviting them to learn together. This was how participation worked! With this sharper definition, the Event took place.

Valhalla is a place known for its problem-solving, not for its fun or questioning. It is inhabited by people on a passionate quest for a just world. To take part in the accepted and formalised channels for communication – intranet, meetings, seminars, informal and formal working groups and short courses – and to read reports and attend seminars could easily take up all of one’s time. A jargon has evolved, and being

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in the know means being on top of which key words to use and when. The use of experts to sign off on any new ideas is a *sine qua non*, as are documents and seminars that look academic.

Whether the individual *Lagom* members thought the Event was something positive or risky, they all agreed on one thing – that breaking with established ‘form’ was much more radical than actually saying something unexpected. But, as they would discover, departing from convention would be difficult to sustain.

### The Log Frame

**A**fter the Event, the question “Where now?” hung in the minds of everyone in *Lagom*. The time seemed to be ripe to have some more structure and a clearer plan for what we were doing. So we arrived in Ragnarok, the meeting room on the seventh floor, where we were surrounded by the orderly offices of the Longphort Department. Curtained off, we organised ourselves to produce a list of things that we were now going to do. Hermod, who had clamoured for structure at the outset, was in his element. He rubbed his hands with glee. Vidar might have poured some scepticism on the scene had he been there – but he wasn’t.

The Event had been scarily chaotic. What the group needed, we all felt, was order. We needed a Plan. What better way to make a plan than to use the very instrument to which Valhalla had become so devoted in recent years: the Logical Framework, otherwise known as the ‘Log Frame’?

Mention the words Log Frame to development workers and watch their faces. It is one of those few development instruments about which there is little ambiguity of feeling – you either love it, or

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hate it. A Log Frame encourages people to separate their aims and objectives into orderly and numbered lists of goals, purposes, activities and outputs and to lay them out logically, providing for each a set of 'objectively verifiable indicators' (OVIs).

*Lagom* was under no obligation to use a structured planning process. Funds and permission to spend time meeting had been provided freely; none of the desk officers' managers seemed perturbed by the need for outputs; and the organisation's stated commitment to learning was, some might argue, admirably observed and indeed modelled by *Lagom*. Still, unease remained about the lack of a tangible set of visible, demonstrable Outputs. This sense of discomfort came in waves. Sometimes, it took the shape of small squalls, generating brief bubbling foam and quickly dissipating, while at other times it gave rise to a generalised choppiness, a sense of something vital that was missing, a broad but indefinable feeling of unrest.

*Lagom* turned to the Experts from Albion amongst them, as an unarticulated need began to surface for a return to the early days when the group had been assigned activities by Cerridwen and Brid, and didn't have to cope with so much personal involvement. Albion was, after all, the

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legendary origin of the Log Frame and home of the Department for Intentional Deliberateness, hallowed by the Nordians for its no-nonsense, all-knowing approach to the problems of the poor. What the group needed, it seemed, was a performance of putting things in neat columns and lists and the sense of achievement as each was ticked off. This would produce the reassurance that tax payers' money was being used productively, that everyone knew where we were going and that we had the kind of Outcomes and Outputs prized by development agencies in the days before Results came into the picture at the front of our minds.

Cerridwen and Brid had little experience in drawing up the kind of Log Frames for which the government of Albion had become so famed. Their group at the Institute of Druidic Sophistry usually got some help from their friends in the Department for Intentional Deliberateness when they needed to prepare their money-raising formulas. But they bravely took up the challenge, taking up their ritual instruments – marker pens – and swathing themselves in the mantle of Albion's innate superiority over matters technical such as these. A matrix was drawn on the whiteboard. The group became animated as, one by one, members called out items to add to each of the boxes. The

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matrix was quickly filled with a comprehensive menu and a veritable feast of activities. The very familiarity of the process of filling in the matrix was comforting; the terms that came to mind were familiar, part of the bureaucrat's everyday life, the incantations used to evoke that stirring sense of rightness that development agencies need to keep stoking to keep people from wondering what on earth they are doing. Within a short period of time, we had a glistening, all-boxes-checked, Log Frame-looking Plan.

The Log Frame that *Lagom* produced was, inevitably, a very *Lagom* kind of Log Frame. It held many ideas of what might be possible, although in their hearts many of the group knew that few of them would actually happen. But the Log Frame served its purpose admirably. It ended our worries about purpose that had displaced the original anxiety about making fools of ourselves and biting off more than we could chew with the Event. We all felt an enormous sense of relief now that *Lagom* was moving forward with clarity and intent.

There was one thing that we had not realised fully: the appearance of order can never really displace the messiness of everyday bureaucratic life. And so our neatly constructed Log Frame became just another one of those nicely built

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models that are so admired at the time but end up being put in the cupboard and forgotten about. It was never mentioned again.

## Participation by Design

The elegant architecture of the Log Frame had, as the group well knew, very little to do with what really happens ‘out there’ in the field. For the Valhalla staff based in Nordstad, ‘out there’ is the reason for their daily work. So rather than just talk about participation, the idea of working together on an actual, ‘out there’, ‘real’ project arose early on in the group. This could give the group practical experience of working participatively. It would show the world how rewarding and effective working in that way could be. Although the idea was mentioned at the very beginning, a number of meetings passed without anything tangible emerging as an actual, real opportunity to put these vague intentions into practice.

In true *Lagom* style, the idea for what came to grow – or, as was the case, shrink – into the group’s ‘practical project’ took shape in the pub after an otherwise uneventful meeting. Vidar had been getting impatient. What we needed, he argued, was something we could get our hands on, something we could actually do. Why not take over an ailing project, one that had been more or

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less forgotten about, given up on, and infuse it with new life, using participative methods? Wouldn't that be more of a challenge than sitting around talking?

The idea of 'hijacking a project', finding an initiative in which the group could apply their developing understanding of participation, was captivating. As they sat with their heads together over plates of Nordanian meatballs and pickled herrings, Vidar, Freja, Hildir, Heimdall, Cerridwen and Brid plotted how they would take over one of the grand Valhalla projects – perhaps the Woodstown project that was the Director General's favourite? Or maybe the Cowdery's Down District Development Programme? Everyone who was anyone in Valhalla had been involved in Cowdery's Down at some point or another so even touching something in the programme there would be a sure way to start fires burning. Besides, all of these ideas held a frisson of doing something subversive.

By the time of the next meeting, the grand plans that had been hatched in the pub had been scaled down. Vidar suggested that he dust off an old planning project in Jorvik and commission a new study for the group to do in a participatory way. As Nordstad desk officers, they knew their chances of interaction with real live primary stakeholders were slim but there was still the

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possibility that they could exercise some control and seek to improve poor people's lives through writing a Terms of Reference for consultants.

There was no time to be lost. Vidar was due to leave for Jorvik within the next few days. Freja emailed the group, calling a meeting. There was excitement in the air. Finally *Lagom* was going to change the world... or change the Terms of Reference anyway.

The point of departure for *Lagom's* intervention was the old Terms of Reference. Maya, a newcomer to the aid business, asked innocently and with a trace of frustration, "Why not let the people in the town decide what they want to work with right from the beginning instead of the suggestion coming from the previous study?"

Five steely pairs of eyes bore down on her, some uncomprehending, others pitying her naivety, "What do you mean?"

Usually Maya's questions were just ignored but this one was just too dumb to be ignored.

"I think what Maya is trying to say is that the agenda is already set in the Terms of Reference", Sol tried to help in more articulate Nordanian.

Finally, Vidar as the chair of the meeting and rightful owner of the project, felt pressured to reply.

"Firstly, it would cost more but more importantly, going to the people right in the

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beginning might mean raising their expectations. This would not be very good, especially if things don't work out."

The concept of not raising people's expectations had often surfaced in our meetings as an important but unwritten and unspoken principle in development work.

Heimdall wondered if the consultants should be asked how they would approach such a study to make it participatory but Vidar replied that since it was so small, it would be better to specify how Valhalla wanted it to be carried out.

The group struggled to make the wording perfect so that the study would be really participatory and that the voices of poor people would actually be reflected in the document. All the various 'layers' such as gender and environment were added. Freja included quite a long section on socio-cultural issues and the group decided that since they were important, but much too long, these would form an appendix.

The tender was sent out and the consultants were chosen. The group then discussed the possibility of seeing how the study was actually received by the people when it was presented. This would be vital to determine if *Lagom* had indeed managed to make a project participatory. Even better, it could be done at almost no cost, since

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two researchers from a sister project in a neighbouring country could go to Jorvik. Emails flew back and forth about what the two researchers should do, what methodology they should use when plans came to an abrupt end: the embassy said that they did not want any more outsiders running around and taking up the valuable time of poor people who had more important things to do than talk to researchers.

The 90-page document that resulted was not much different from any other Valhalla report, except that this one had used the word 'participation' more often. There was no section on methodology to show how the study had been conducted, nor had the consultants gone back for a final presentation and discussion with the local people as the *Lagom* group had thought was agreed.

Maya pointed out a section on the need for participatory training so that people would understand partnership principles in development while Freja asked, "How did they reach the conclusion that the people wanted participatory training? Did people come up to them and said we want to be trained?"

Freja could confirm, however, that the report was completely up-to-date and included the latest development jargon.

Then there was a slight difference of opinion in

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the group between the anthropologists and those more technically inclined. The two anthropologists, Freja and Sol, believed that there should have been a socio-cultural presentation so that there could have been a better picture of the town. Vidar, looking tired, pointed to page 15 of the document, where the whole population of Jorvik had been listed. The anthropologists were still not satisfied; they would have liked a detailed description of the ethnic groups. Eventually, the matter was dropped.

There were so many questions and problems with the report that the group members agreed to discuss matters face to face with the consultants. But the consultants felt they had signed off the project and the embassy wanted to get on with finalising plans, so eventually that idea was dropped too.

*Lagom* had valiantly tried to influence the outcome of the project but this experience had shown how far removed a desk officer was from being really able to change the course of action. 'Participation' had become more than a question of involving the townspeople in the planning. It called for a particular way of working. It raised uncomfortable issues about participation, not only in Jorvik but also in Valhalla, at the embassy and with the consultants.

### Making an Impact: Influencing Worldkom

Anyone wanting to know what Valhalla does would start by looking at its policies. It just so happened that the Nordian government began working on a radical new development policy during this time. A parliamentary committee, Worldkom, had been given the task of drafting a proposal on how to shape Nordia's development ambitions to its new global politics. As always, this proposal was sent out to the public and numerous organisations for their comments.

Worldkom was a formal forum where *Lagom* could make its voice heard and scrutinise the Worldkom report wearing their newly found participation spectacles.

They could come up with ground-breaking and solid recommendations for placing participation of poor people on Nordia's development agenda. It was an easy decision to take; unlike many other decisions we had confronted, this was one to which nobody objected. The report was distributed to all members, a date was set and a meeting room booked.

As the time of the meeting drew near, coffee and cinnamon rolls were promptly delivered on a



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tea-trolley outside the room. The meeting began. Not one single member of the Valhalla group had read all of the hundreds of pages of the document; some had read selected parts while others had only glanced at the introduction. The discussion started fairly well. Those who had looked through the document read the quotes they had marked up to the others. Some quotes were upsetting: the whole report was flavoured with a certain image of ‘if only the world could become more Nordian it would be so much better for all’. Other quotes were more promising, relating to the group’s mission: more opportunities for poor people to participate. With very little knowledge about the content of the report, the group still managed to spend a good two hours having a very opinionated discussion about it. They were, after all, experienced Valhalla staff who were used to attending meetings with little time for preparation! It seemed as if it was more comfortable to talk to each other for two hours than to spend the same amount of time reading.

As the meeting drew towards its end, a few points had been scribbled on the whiteboard and most of the discussion was safely documented in the notebook of one of the researchers. The group still firmly believed that they should produce something for the official Valhalla response but how would they

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do it? None of them really had the time to read the report properly and putting a response on paper would be even more time-consuming. But what they did have was co-researchers, and not just any co-researchers. One of them was Sol, an experienced Valhalla consultant. It was an almost unspoken agreement that Sol would draft the group’s response and Freja would ensure its delivery. They did just that. An excellent response was delivered as agreed to the Director General’s office and Freja and Sol were thanked politely for it and told it would be read with interest.

That was the last that *Lagom* heard about the matter. It was never mentioned again. They had produced, delivered and filed a piece of paper and that was the end of the story. Needless to say, this was nothing unusual to those who worked in Valhalla, nor did it diminish the group’s enthusiasm for its mission. It did, however, work to reinforce the already-existing scepticism within the group that nothing written – a memo, a policy statement or an analytic paper – would make the slightest bit of difference to the organisation. It was precisely this rather inchoate and unarticulated feeling that would resurface so powerfully in the group’s last joint venture.

## The Document

It is generally expected that research projects will produce some kind of document that puts an account of findings and lessons learnt into black and white. *Lagom* wanted to produce something that would change Valhalla, so the question of what kind of documents the group wanted to generate had always been part of our discussions. Then we began to realise the contradictions between the impetus to produce a written document and the experience of desk officers with the Worldkom report.

In the busy lives of the desk officers, documents are a chore rather than a source of interest and excitement. It followed, therefore, that their colleagues would be unlikely to actually read anything that *Lagom* produced unless it could hold their attention by being quite extraordinary. The written word, we had realised by then, was an area of profound ambivalence. This was partly about time: no time to write, no time to read, and no desire for it either when it's possible to speak, discuss, agree and argue. Paradoxically, too, the written word is also the place where decisions are made irrevocable. But there was something more

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than this. Aid documents rarely contain any emotion or demonstrate the desire to make a difference that was the actual motivation for many people working in development bureaucracies. Written in the passive voice, aid documents strive to be technically proficient, objective, impassive and comprehensive.

Some of the group did like to write, and even managed to find the time to do so. The space that was *Lagom* was, though, somewhere where the spoken word ruled, and where it was the very ephemeral nature of speech – spoken in a particular place, to particular people, whispered, giggled, muttered, or uttered in tones of exasperation, anger, despair, collusion – that made it a medium with which we were comfortable. It began to feel as if some of those in the group believed that committing ideas to paper in such a way would expose their flaws and those of the group in such a way that it was too dangerous, too raw, too risky for them to contemplate. Anything said could be uttered and forgotten; anything written might be copied, circulated and judged.

*Lagom* successfully avoided producing any significant documents for a readership beyond the group other than a progress report that had served an almost ceremonial function. Then the crunch came. The group gathered at a salubrious

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conference venue outside Nordstad, for a final retreat and writing workshop. Here, we intended to produce a short paper written for desk officers by desk officers on participation, and a briefing on the methodology we'd used.

At the end of the retreat, neither was complete.

We'd had an animated discussion, as a result of which we'd agreed on what needed to be included. We'd busied ourselves creating bits of text. But it soon became all too apparent that we had some radically different ideas on what exactly the document should contain. One view was that it should be a guide for desk officers on understanding participation and its applications. The other was that it should address the desk officer's frustration and creativity and encourage them to clarify their own ideas on participation. We could not reach an agreement on the overall format of the paper and, almost as a reflex, Sol was left to mop up the pieces and pull a document together.

The document that emerged looked and read like any other document that Valhalla might produce – or, as often happened, that a consultant might produce in the name of the organisation. It was clearly written, comprehensive and informative. It couldn't be faulted for what it said. But it wasn't *Lagom*. And some of those from Valhalla strongly felt that it didn't represent the

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### **Voices of the Bureaucrats – Crying Out for Help**

*Here, if you work with poor people you're a saint. If you work with rural roads, you're an ogre.*

*We have to get people to respect the bureaucratic work they're doing. They work with their hearts but don't respect it. Part of our work is to get the funds through the machinery.*

*There are a lot of documents floating around. The words are very important but they just seem to float away.*

These are the unheard voices of bureaucrats within Valhalla. Representatives of the bilateral aid organisation that was one of the first to put the participation of poor people on the map of development. Every day they struggle with the administrative machinery: correspondence that has to be registered, contracts that must be entered into the database, and financial reports that need to be followed up. They travel long distances to work on overcrowded trains, walking carefully on streets covered in ice in the early January morning, enduring the long months from October until March when the only light they see is the radiation from the computer screens. Some of them do this because they believe that the world can change, that governments can be made to listen to the poor women and men of their countries and the forces of globalisation can be harnessed into something good. It is rumoured that others know how the diligent bureaucrat can claim more immediate rewards in the form of expatriate benefits – the lovely golf courses, sundowners at the yacht club and the big house in a country where the sun shines 12 months of the year.

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real spirit of *Lagom*. We'd wanted to express ourselves but we'd become a secret that couldn't be told to the outside world. Something of our intentions needed to be communicated beyond the group but how to do so was difficult to imagine, and we became anxious once more.

The matter was taken back into the group when Freja had an idea, recruited others to help and produced a document that was unlike anything that had ever before been written by or for Valhalla. Freja had realised that if *Lagom* were to produce a written document, it had to have that extraordinary factor that worked like speech worked on people. This kind of document would make a difference precisely because unlike the documents that ended their lives within those immaculate cloth-bound official covers lining Valhalla's shelves, this one would be read and talked about. It would be different. It would make an impact; it would be daring, funny, brilliant. It would be *Lagom*.

The new document, *Voices of the Bureaucrats – Crying Out for Help* featured a diary of a desk officer, inundated with emails and meetings and grappling in the midst of it all to have any space to think or do anything differently. It captured the urgency of action, the sense of purpose and the frustration – anger, even – that many of the group

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members felt in relation to the grindingly mundane bureaucratic process and it did so in prose packed with verve and allusion. It was a totally different document and those who liked it loved it; others hated it. At the same time, it was a dangerously different piece of writing, something that implied taking a real risk: stunning if it came off, perhaps worse than embarrassing if it didn't.

As the excerpt on page 50 shows, *Voices of the Bureaucrats* began by putting the people who work for Valhalla firmly into the picture.

This evocative account of donors' everyday lives – the perks, as well as the hardships – was, some felt, too close to the bone. It would upset people. It would annoy people. It would put people off. For some of the group, the *Voices of the Bureaucrats* document was delicious because it was so different; for others, it compounded the kind of risks the group had taken with the Event. As agreement on the final version began to coalesce, Lofn took a position of steely nerve and spoke out.

Lofn was uncomfortable with the idea of yet another head-above-the-parapet moment. Her fear was that it would disrupt the slower, more incremental, change that could be brought about *if only no-one noticed what was happening*. It was not just the case that no single document could actually make change happen, it was the fact that it

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could do the opposite of what the group intended: it might create an impression that this group were not serious and mean that no-one would take them seriously. And that *would* be serious.

More work was done on the *Voices of the Bureaucrats* document to seek consensus within the group. Attempts were made to change its tone, editing out any of the lines that might disturb, inserting some diagrams for those who like that kind of thing and generally softening its punch. But like any document written by a committee and purged through endless drafts of what made it hang together in the first place, it just didn't work. And the document remained as an electronic file saved in an ageing folder.

## **Making *Sense* of Valhalla – The Red and the Blue**

Our original concept note was entitled ‘Making Sense of Participation in Valhalla’. It was only after the group had abandoned the document, though, that we actually began to make sense of *Valhalla*. It was Maya, who came up with a view of Valhalla that helped explain our dilemma. Holding one red pen and one blue pen, her head lowered over a piece of flip chart paper at a learning workshop in early 2003, she drew a picture showing two sets of interlinked dots, one red set linked with red lines, and one blue set, linked with blue lines. There were no lines linking the blue and the red networks but they sat alongside each other.

Maya described the red dots as being the formal positions and artefacts of the organisation: its hierarchy, its policies, its formal meetings and documents with the blue dots representing the informal processes: the people you know, the telephone calls, the stories about what happened where, the unwritten ideas, the ways things really get done.

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The dilemma *Lagom* faced was that, without exception, the kind of documents one might find in Valhalla were red. Often representing official decisions, they were authorised or commissioned by those controlling formal channels through the organisation. These documents tend to be bland; their function was as much to knit the organisation together as to guide it towards action. *Voices of the Bureaucrats* was neither bland nor driven by the need for organisational coherence. It did not explain, set out a position or make recommendations. It was, instead, a blue call to action. It was cheeky, speaking the unspeakable. Blue all the way through, the document could not possibly have been mistaken for anything even slightly official. This was its strength but was also its weakness. The fear that Lofn had most powerfully articulated had rippled through the group: that the document, like the Event, would bewilder rather than have the intended effect. (Quite what that effect was had never really been discussed but we had hopes for it all the same.)

*Lagom* had begun as a red network, an official group which was to carry out an official learning project. But its different gatherings, from the pub to the *Lagom* meeting to the Event, were each different shades of blue. Tension had arisen because the redness made us scared; it made us

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write lists of things to do and documents to produce. Whenever we *acted* we went with the blue but we were masquerading as red: we were effectively making red excuses to be there, because no-one in the group felt it was permissible to use official time or the Nordan taxpayer's money to do anything blue. We all knew that blue was as important as red in getting things done but there was a strong sense that blue was something personal and that personal was indulgent.

Valhalla's documents follow a format that is completely red but conveying what the group wanted to communicate with their colleagues through a red document felt wrong exactly *because* those in the group who objected to such a document were perhaps the first to bin or file similar documents without a second glance.

What *Lagom* wanted was to capture people's attention and to do the very thing that most Valhalla documents fail to do: speak to them as *people*, in a highly personal way. Communicating in this way carried a huge risk. Lofn argued that it was better to use blue methods and blue routes for change but not to attract attention by 'outing' the group by distributing such a blue document. Others argued that it was a red document that was actually needed, one that could be used tactically to justify blue activities or recommendations.

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In retrospect, it seems extraordinary that we could ever have thought that one document – whether a red one or a blue one – would be able to speak to the organisation-at-large on a topic as ambiguous and multifaceted as participation. How, given the many differences in culture between Valhalla's departments and individuals' styles of thinking and reasoning, did we think we could reach everyone with a single piece of writing?

*Lagom* had worked on an assumption of uniformity and a need for formality. Yet everything we'd learnt about Valhalla told us of an organisation in which individuality was prized, in which unwritten rules accompanied the creative process of rule-bending to get around a formidable and cumbersome bureaucratic system, and in which communication (and much of what would be thought of as 'organisational learning') happens through informal, often barely visible, networks and interactions. Making the blue into red, or even finding a suitable shade of purple to communicate with, just wasn't going to do what was needed.

### Conclusion

**W**hat conclusions are we to draw from these episodes in the life of *Lagom*? The tales we tell here speak of some of the difficulties faced by the group in effecting change in their immediate organisational environment, let alone on 'development' out there. Yet, at the same time, these are tales of taking charge, of a willingness to step out of line, do things differently and take the kind of risks that would seem anathema to what we're taught to believe that bureaucrats are able or willing to do.

We rarely hear words of praise or admiration for people working for development bureaucracies. More often, they are described as middle-of-the-road, second-rate, obsessed by procedures, out-of-touch with what is really going on, behind-the-times, *bureaucratic*, thick-skinned, cushioned from reality, paper-pushers, rule-enforcers, boring and naïve, cloddish and arrogant... But those who work in Valhalla are also public servants, many of whom chose to work in international development because they had a passionate desire to make a difference. No-one actually likes all the constraining procedures, the red tape, rules and



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regulations that have to be followed but sometimes rules are justified: as checks on the power of the individual and to maintain accountability to the public purse.

The emotions and ideals that guide and motivate the work of many people in Valhalla, and which prompted them to join an organisation that hopes to make the world a fairer, better place, have few outlets in development bureaucrats' daily work routines. The emphasis is on being effective and efficient. Time is a commodity to be used parsimoniously and to good effect. Talking can easily become chatting or gossiping; interacting, musing, reflecting, discussing, even laughing, all of this takes time away from the other things that might – or indeed must – be done. Every desk officer is aware of the guilt of ineffectiveness. Without opportunities to give permission to dream, to build the spirit, to restore flagging passions and animate weary minds, what prospect is there for bureaucrats to do things that will make a real difference?

One Valhalla senior manager put the contradictions that those whom he calls 'passionate bureaucrats' face very clearly:

The idea of participation is being concerned about the people... we need to invest in that

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sensibility... we also have to get people to respect the bureaucratic work they're doing. They work with their hearts and don't respect it [the bureaucratic work]. Part of our work is to get the funds through the machinery.

What makes the 'passionate bureaucrat' tick is a sense of connectedness with action, with seeing things done – the impatience manifest in Vidar's restless energy, Hildir's indignance, Lofn's careful strategy, Heimdall's quiet passion, Hermod's desire for things to be done properly and Freja's fiery frustration with business as usual – and with making the most of limited resources to bring about the kind of change that so many of those who work for Valhalla want to see happen.

At first those who lived their daily working lives in Valhalla didn't admit that they needed time to think, time to play even. This didn't fit with the image of what a responsible – let alone a passionate – bureaucrat is supposed to do with their time. But being *Lagom* and tangling with the Beast of Bureaucracy created the space to think and to play; and how good it felt to have, in the midst of the routines of a daily life full of emails, meetings and documents, that time to stand back, to laugh, to muse, to give voice to feelings and half-formed ideas, to *learn*.

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Words like fun, pleasure, laughter are not generally part of the vocabulary of writings on institutionalising participation. It is almost as if no-one would dare suggest that so serious a matter as participation could actually be tackled through people's everyday lives because it is important and because they believe in it and it is even enjoyable to work with, not just a duty. The image of the faceless bureaucrat of the public sector organisations is totally at odds with the diverse personalities and passions of the people who work within them. The stories we tell here emphasise that human element, bringing the dulled images painted of intransigent bureaucracies alive with the experiences of real people who are struggling to make a difference.

So what difference *did* it all make? Group members carried the new questions they had come to ask into their departments. Lofn developed her own version of our methodology, a four-meeting-long 'mini *Lagom*' that got her colleagues thinking more deeply about what participation might mean in their work. Quietly, and at times quite surreptitiously, *Lagom* members undertook many of those small acts that they came to see as the blue entry points for change. Occasionally, some found the chance to influence the reddest of documents and processes;

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as members on key policy committees, *Lagom* members were able, wherever they could, to insert lines of text, quibble over new procedures and inscribe into bureaucratese some of the ideas that had bubbled up in the group's discussions. They continued to go on duty trips and to meetings, conferences and workshops. But their contributions in those formal spaces were qualitatively different than they might have been without the space and time for thought that the group had offered. All of this could be paraded as Results. And it could even be measured by taking a word or phrase inserted into a policy here, or into a consultancy Terms of Reference there, as well as by tracking back from changes that *Lagom* members were able to bring about in business as usual. But to declare these acts and name their effects would derail their potential to make incremental changes: precisely because they would then become visible.

For all our hopes and aspirations, *Lagom* was never able to really be red enough to succeed in its struggle with the Beast of Bureaucracy and achieve what many of us had hoped for: to bring about significant changes in the organisation. But that was *Lagom's* strength as well. *Lagom* allowed the space to be uncertain, questioning, indecisive, undecided, and the time to mull over an argument or to reflect on a question that had been needling.

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As Vidar explained, “I spend all my working life trying to be so damn effective. It’s such a relief not having to do that, I can even be creative.” *Lagom* became a place in which a group of very different people from different corners of the organisation could find kindred spirits, bring meaning to their work, strengthen their resolve to persist with small acts that might, over time, make a difference – and find a space for taking pleasure in everyday working lives that can all too often be such a source of stress and frustration. The Beast of Bureaucracy remains untamed but the spirit of *Lagom* remains undimmed – and for those who were part of it, bureaucratic ‘business as usual’ will never be quite the same again.

