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## **Participatory policy evaluation as an innovative method to improve processes of sustainable rural development**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents an innovative process-orientated self-evaluation method regarding sustainable rural development processes, developed by the University of Göttingen in cooperation with rural actors and a consultant. This method, which is also available online, can be employed by rural development initiatives in order to manage their own work successfully. The paper presents the general evaluation research design and the computer-based method for the self-evaluation of regional development initiatives. It also discusses the potential problems of such a participatory research design which emerged through important empirical findings.*

**Keywords:** *Sustainable rural development, LEADER+, Policy-evaluation, Germany, Participatory research, Methodology*

### **Introduction - the EU community initiative LEADER+<sup>1</sup> as the background to the evaluation**

#### ***LEADER+ and the concept of regional governance***

To promote processes of rural sustainable development, the EU-community initiative LEADER+ is offering support to rural areas all over Europe until 2006.<sup>2</sup> To obtain subsidies within the scope of LEADER+, local partnerships have to be established and a regional action plan formulating an integrated, high-quality, original strategy for a special region has to be prepared in cooperation with local actors (infoBase Europe 2001, European Commission 2000). LEADER+ promotes the long-term development of rural networks rather than financing short-term investigative development measures. In this way, the European Commission is able to focus its interest on processes of rural communication and cooperation.

Rural development initiatives have to define their regional context individually and have to develop a regional action plan before they can submit an application for subsidies within the scope of LEADER+. A rural region is no longer only determined by geographical or economic data, but also by the social networks that constitute and define "its" individual regional background for collective action: Participation, evaluation

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and strong competition (only the best plans are funded) are the main principles of LEADER+. LEADER+ stimulates new forms of regional governance in rural areas - the emergence of a regional bottom up-structure, guided by a top-down institutional framework provided by the European Union and the national state-levels. This concept reflects the current scientific discussion on new forms of regional governance that focuses on the importance of regional cooperation and networks as preconditions for successful regional development, stimulating policy-learning of rural actors (Benz et al. 2000, Benz and Fürst 2002). Regional governance signifies that the endogenous potentials of regions are at the centre of a rural development strategy. Rural development policy should incite the local and regional actors to self-help. A region is no longer determined by its administrative or geographical borders but by its functions as a region for tourism, for nature protection, or intensive as well as organic farming. The building up of networks and cooperation between all relevant actors within a rural region represents the organising principle of regional governance: rural partnerships have to devise and organise their specific development process in an individual and democratic manner (Ray 2000, Moseley 2003). In order to stimulate such rural development processes, financial funds or competitions are organised by the higher state-levels which are able to motivate rural actors to act together and to devise a rural development strategy (Elbe and Meyer 2005). The LEADER+ concept of the EU represents such a “modern” approach to rural policy, since these elements of regional governance all are included in the programme: rural partnerships have to be organised in a way that enforces democratic participation at all levels; sustainability, gender mainstreaming, and transparency. Regional Governance for LEADER+ aims to connect the advantages of hierarchy (the EU rules for the program, the national programs for the implementation of LEADER+, the need for evaluation at different levels) with the advantages of self-coordination and network governance (the establishment of a bottom up-structure and the use of local knowledge at regional level).<sup>3</sup>

### **The need for self-evaluation methods**

Since the 1988 EU structural funds reform, the use of evaluations has become an important method of improving the EU rural development policy (Bauer 2001). Within LEADER+, evaluations are also prescribed and have to be facilitated on different levels. In Germany, the federal states have to evaluate the success of LEADER+ in those regions which lie in the federal state. Classic summative evaluations measuring the outputs and outcomes of LEADER+ are often employed (Toepel and Schwab 2005), nevertheless ongoing self-evaluations on the level of one supported region are also highly recommended by the EU (European Commission 2002) – the local action groups themselves should be able to manage and evaluate their own development independently. Another kind than classic summative evaluation methods seems to be necessary in order for the local action groups to manage and self-evaluate themselves. This kind of evaluation should be not so much focused on the outputs as on the rural development process and on the different aspects of regional governance as the main underlying concept of LEADER+. Evaluation methods must therefore also be developed to serve as a proce-

dural tool to be used by the rural actors to enable self-evaluation, and not only to be applied by professional policy evaluators.

This paper discusses the development and the application of such a participatory evaluation research method through which it seems to be possible to improve processes of sustainable rural development as understood in the way described above. This method has been used to manage and to self-evaluate rural development processes in different German LEADER+ regions as well as being adopted as the evaluation method of the German rural development initiative "Active regions" (Elbe and Meyer 2005).

### **The evaluation research - general aspects and methods of empirical research**

Within this area, policy evaluation has to deal more with policy processes than with policy outputs., The evaluation is therefore based on public policy analysis (Howlett and Ramesh 1995, Bussmann et al. 1995) and is intended not only "to determine the success and failure of public policies but even more importantly to examine the factors that help explain such outcomes" (Kraft 1998, 299). That means that this evaluation does not measure policy outputs such as the creation of, for example, new jobs or enterprises in the agricultural sector. It rather addresses the development of new forms of cooperation between social actors, new regional networks or regional policy learning processes. The research design represents current approaches of regional governance research (Benz et al. 2000; Benz and Fürst 2002) that emphasize the significance of new forms of cooperation between regional actors aiming for sustainable regional development. One significant problem of these new forms of regional governance is, however, that, due to its costs, cooperation is often demanded but not practiced. "Individual costs in form of time, personnel, money and especially restrictions in the scope of autonomous decision-making are often regarded as higher than the expected future and rather diffuse common gains of cooperation" (Auel 2002, 115).

The research presented here focuses more on the ongoing *policy processes* of regional development than on their results. The main question is to find and to apply institutional and procedural factors promoting successful rural development within the scope of LEADER+. Such factors are widely discussed in the literature available on regional policy and can be used for the evaluation research design. This evaluation design generally refers to what the European Commission aims to achieve with the LEADER+ initiative: the establishment of cooperation and local partnerships in rural areas. Partners within this research were the University of Göttingen as scientific evaluator, a consultant who advised regional stakeholders, and some core actors (the regional managers) of six German LEADER+-regions.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation research deliberately integrated the regional actors, as they are able to provide their rural area with detailed knowledge of the situation in the area. The whole research was therefore designed in a participatory way in order to be able to include indigenous knowledge into the evaluation: This design relates to new approaches in public policy analysis that discuss the problems of technocratic professional expertise and policy advice and the necessity of citizens' participation so as to reach democratic governance: only the collaboration between citizens

and experts seems to stimulate a new form of policy advice that really helps to find solutions in a complex world (Fischer 2003).

### ***Success factors as key elements of the policy evaluation***

From a political scientist's view, new forms of regional governance based on the cooperation between all relevant actors in a regional framework are undoubtedly central prerequisites if sustainable regional development is to be attained. However, these conditions themselves are dependent on a special institutional framework. One of the most widely discussed questions of modern political theory is how cooperations evolve and how they can be stabilised (Axelrod 1984, Braun 1999). The success of cooperation for sustainable development is not self-evident, because sustainable development could turn from a consensus-orientated concept into a cause for conflict, if social actors have to alter their individual behaviour in order to achieve the common good of sustainable development (Böcher and Krott 2002). New forms of governance for sustainable regional development should not be taken as a matter of course; they have to be enforced during the political process. In such a political process, actors negotiate alternatives for rural development. Actors asking for sustainable rural development to become a central aspect of a strategy for rural development have to know which factors will enable them to reach their goals within the political process. It is therefore not sufficient to formulate ideals of regional sustainable development; the question is how to establish new forms of governance in rural areas. The regional political processes, the regional institutional framework and regional problems as underlying conditions for cooperation have to be integrated in the policy evaluation of sustainable development processes. For the present policy evaluation, the *way* to cooperation is the most important research objective. This relates to an effort towards the formulation of practical indicators that can help regional stakeholders to evaluate their own strategies and successes in the future.

A number of factors potentially serve as the basis of our evaluation research (Böcher 2002). Firstly, driving political forces behind the success of rural development processes were identified and analysed on the basis of a literature analysis and own former research (Brendle 1999, Krott 1999, Westholm et al. 1999). These factors were then used and supplemented during an ex-ante evaluation of the general political conditions in six rural regions in Germany, all of which have submitted an application to LEADER+. For that initial evaluation the factors were used as indicators and key elements to evaluate regional development concepts (RDC) and to formulate guiding questions for interviews with regional stakeholders are as follows.

#### ***a) The pressure of problems***

All regional actors feel the pressure of certain problems which, in turn, leads them to initiate a cooperative rural development strategy. Such a pressure can be triggered by "objective" problems, for example a high rate of unemployment or ecological problems like continuous floods; but it also has to be felt subjectively by each local actor, so that they may start to search for a solution.

***b) Project-design that supports win-win coalitions***

The tracing of win-win-coalitions is an important condition for success in achieving sustainable rural development. Actors are only willing to cooperate if there are more benefits to be drawn from the cooperation than without it. This means that, for example, agriculture and nature protection must both be winners within a specific project if it is designed to build up cooperation.

***c) Short-term success***

Rural development projects that are designed to realise short-term partial success, should be able to motivate actors, to persuade critics, and to build up trust in the regional promoters of sustainable development. It is therefore very important for local partnerships to use short-term successes as a continuous promotion for the rural development process.

***d) Manageable structures and opportunities for linkage***

The transaction costs of projects decrease if they have manageable structures. The feasibility of cooperation increases if the number of actors involved in a specific project is not too large. The feasibility of success for sustainable rural development processes increases if the process ties in with existing structures in the region or with existing funding programs. Actors who wish to establish a LEADER+ partnership are more successful if they integrate existing former rural development initiatives or observe existing regional development concepts within the region.

***e) Powerful interceders and partners***

Sustainable rural development can be reached if powerful interceders and partners support regional development initiatives. Local partnerships are more successful if they can win prominent local actors as supporters. These partners can be local or regional politicians (for example a well-known mayor) or other important rural actors (for example a well-known farmer).

***f) Learning aptitude and exchange of information***

It is very important for the establishment of rural cooperation that the involved actors on the local level be able to learn from each other in order to overcome potential conflicts in negotiations. At national and European level, the EU, through LEADER+, supports rural areas in the establishment of networks which enable the areas to exchange information and learn from each other by studying the best practices.

***g) Transparency, process competence, and flexibility***

Process competence concerns the development of adequate strategies to analyse the underlying institutional conditions of the rural development process. It also means that regional actors must master methods of conflict solving. The structures of cooperation

must be flexible and transparent – only then can compromises be made and learning facilitated.

#### ***h) Participation***

Networks between social actors are the basis of sustainable regional development within LEADER+. If every actor in a region has a fair chance of participating, the legitimization of the network increases. This is very important since the actors participating in the local partnerships are not empowered to act as representatives through a formal, democratic election process. Local partnerships therefore have to be, in principle, open to the participation of newcomers instead of establishing a "closed shop" constituted by the local elite.

#### ***i) Regional promoters as policy entrepreneurs***

"Policy entrepreneurs advocate new ideas and develop proposals, define and reframe problems; specify policy alternatives; broker the ideas among the many policy actors; mobilize public opinion; help set the decision making agenda" (Roberts und King 1991, 48). Especially in the initial stage of a cooperative rural development processes, a special kind of core actor is important. Such actors are promoters who possess the necessary detailed knowledge of the specific regional situation and of possibilities to attract funding. Such actors lead the local partnership and bring out the core of the rural development network.

#### ***j) Critical mass of labour, time and money for the regional management***

Rural development projects cannot be initiated without actors investing time or money into the start-up process. At this stage it is also important that actors work without expecting immediate rewards. At a later stage structures of regional management have to be established and financed.

#### ***k) Competent regional management***

Regional management constitutes the core of a rural development network. Regional managers have to be able to analyse the regional political situation, to engage partners and to communicate the benefits of sustainable development for the region. The regional managers organise workshops and meetings between the actors of the local action partnership and between potential project partners. They steer the whole process.

### **An example of the application of the success factors**

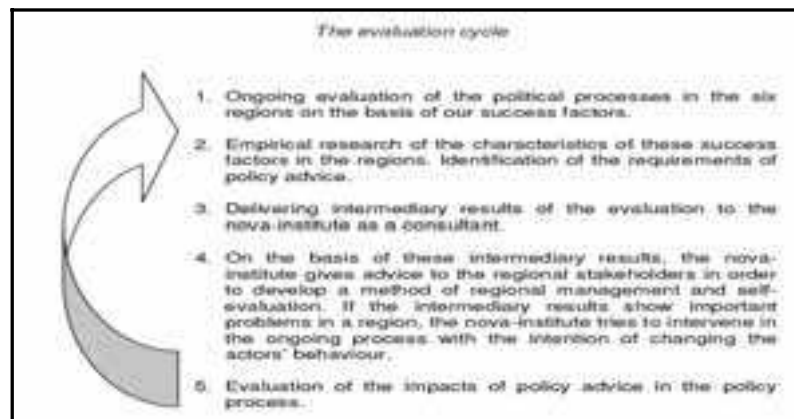
The abovementioned success factors were used to formulate guiding questions for interviews with regional stakeholders. For example, regional actors in the six regions were asked if they could identify sustainability promoters within the region at an initial stage of the development process. In all regions, the interviewed persons identified the same

core-actors as promoters. They were described as persons who work for their ideals, not for their personal interests. This result shows the existence of policy entrepreneurs in the regions and points out the value of using such a success factor in the evaluation.

In another case the regional actors were asked if every important sector had already been integrated in the rural development partnership. In one of the six regions, all actors claimed that the participation of local farmers should be enhanced. It was thus possible to evaluate the degree of participation of the different sectors at this stage of the process and to identify actors that still have to be integrated. The main procedural problems every region faces when implementing LEADER+ at a particular time could be identified on the basis of the success factors.

### Evaluation of the implementation of success factors - the evaluation cycle

An ongoing evaluation which consisted of similar sequences of evaluation-cycles all made up of the same steps (figure 1) and which was based on the success factors was begun. The ongoing evaluation was carried out in cooperation with a consultant, the *nova-institute of political and ecological innovation*.



**Figure 1.** The evaluation cycle

#### Which advantages does this type of evaluation research offer?

A main advantage of such an evaluation research design is that the results of an ongoing evaluation can be fed back repeatedly into the political process. A second advantage lies in the cooperation with a consultant who tests the recommendations in practice and advises the main actors of the regions. The promoters are key actors in the research: They are actors who are able to overview the political situation in their region and to spread the key results of the whole research in their region. The main purpose of the research is for regional promoters to learn how to use a method of self-evaluation in order to realise the aims of the community initiative LEADER+. During common work-



shops, the *University of Göttingen* as the evaluator, the *nova-institute* as the consultant, and the regional promoters discussed the next steps in order to find the “best way” of carrying out an ongoing evaluation. The results of scientific research can thus be used and modified for application in practice through the help of practitioners, a consultant, and political science. Göttingen University, as the scientific actor who initially formulated the success factors as a basis of the whole evaluation, never advised the rural actors directly. This factor is of great importance, since the neutral evaluation by the University of the implementation of suggestions also made by the University would constitute a major problem. The University of Göttingen therefore evaluated the political processes in six regions and delivered the intermediary results of the evaluation to the consultant who, based on these, developed his individual policy advice. Only the consultant directly advised the rural actors, so the university was still able to evaluate the effects of this advice without being too much involved.

A third advantage is that the evaluation results are regularly discussed with practitioners. This approach helps to overcome a serious problem in policy advice: many policy recommendations fail in practice because of their scientific language and because they are formulated in a way that is rarely understood by social actors. The consultant regularly discussed the status quo of the LEADER+ implementation in the six regions with the regional actors. These discussions lead to a method of self-evaluation based on the success factors, but linguistically formulated by the regional actors themselves. This procedure enhances the chance that regional actors employ this self-evaluation method even if there is no consultant working with them.

#### Which problems arise from this research method?

One methodological problem concerns the difficulty of measuring such qualitative indicators. To avoid this, the University team interviewed a large number of regional actors (promoters and critics) to avoid a misjudgement of the real regional situation, which might well appear if only some key advocates of sustainable rural development were consulted. An effort was made to combine the opinion of the actors with a theory-driven evaluation that was also based on the analysis of documents and articles in the local press. Finally, an anonymous questionnaire was used to obtain the opinion of a large number of regional actors. The promise of anonymity was meant to motivate actors to express their honest opinion on the rural development process. All of the empirical data was interpreted on the basis of political theory and public policy analysis. Such a combination of methods of empirical research is meant to avoid problems emerging from the use of qualitative methods.

Another practical problem was that not every regional promoter involved in the evaluation research was open to the advice of the consultant. There are regional promoters who are so well established in their local area and so successful in their daily work that they are not really interested in a method of structured self-evaluation. It is therefore very difficult to convince them that using a method of self-evaluation in their daily work would lead to a better rural development process than just acting on instinct. Thus the self-evaluation method is most suitable for rural regions which are not yet very ex-

perienced with cooperative rural development processes. Regional promoters who are not very experienced with regional development processes and wish to initiate such a process in their region can benefit in particular.

### **The result: a management method for the self-evaluation of rural development processes**

The consultant started with the success factors and regularly used the results of the ongoing evaluation to advise the regional promoters of the six regions. In nine workshops, regional problems were discussed and solutions were developed through the exchange of information between the participants. It became clear that every region has, to a certain degree, similar problems, for example, how to develop the rural development concept or how to motivate other actors to participate. Policy advice continuously consisted of two parts: on the one hand, current regional problems were discussed and, on the other hand, a self-evaluation method was developed integrating the findings of these discussions (Nova-Institute 2002). The combination of advising regional actors on current problems with the development of a long term method increased the satisfaction of the participants with the workshops. In general, the self-evaluation method can be used by every rural partnership to estimate its success or to identify problems that might emerge during the implementation of rural development action. The self-evaluation method consists of a checklist and a short manual.<sup>5</sup> The checklist explains each success factor in short and formulates relevant guiding questions. Specific examples from the regions supplement the guiding questions and explain how a concrete success factor can take effect in practice. This checklist can be used as a questionnaire.

Figure 2 represents one section of the checklist and illustrates how this self-evaluation is designed. The respondents should estimate the characteristics of every success factor by using a Likert scale. The additional guiding questions help them to understand and to elaborate on every evaluative statement of the questionnaire. On the one hand, it is possible for regional management to use this questionnaire to identify the core problems and successes of the regional development process. On the other hand, all actors of a local partnership can be asked to fill the questionnaire in order to obtain a comprehensive estimation of the status quo. The results of such a survey can then be used to discuss potential difficulties of rural development processes and to identify tentative solutions. To analyse the questionnaire in an easy way, a PC-based (MS-Excel) tool is delivered with the checklist. It is then possible to generate a net diagram (figure 3).

This net diagram represents the situation of a region at a given time. It shows a region that has problems with several aspects of the rural development process: On the one hand, there are not enough strong partners, the region lacks a strong promoter, and the resources for the process are still too weak. On the other hand, the participation of regional actors is good and the rural development process is designed in a transparent manner. With the help of this checklist and the Excel-tool it is possible to evaluate the status quo of the LEADER+ implementation and to visualise important findings of the survey easily. The generated net diagrams can then be used as slides for presentations in

1	Pressure of Problems and Willingness to find a solution	does not apply					strongly applies
		1 (0%)	2 (25%)	3 (50%)	4 (75%)	5 (100%)	
1.1	<b>There are publicly acknowledged pressing problems in the region.</b>						
helping question	<i>What is the central problem in the region (for example high unemployment rate, decline of agriculture?)</i>						
1.2	<b>There are actors in the region that are affected by the problem and want to find a solution.</b>						
helping question	<i>Which persons or groups are affected? Which actor is affected so as to be willing to work for its solution?</i>						
1.3	<b>There are real possibilities of solving the problem.</b>						
helping question	<i>Which solutions are available? How realistic are they? Are they accepted as a common way?</i>						
1.4	<b>There is a strong regional identification that motivates regional actors to cooperate.</b>						
helping question	<i>Do the citizens of the region identify themselves with the region or the regional nature? Does identification affect the willingness to act together for regional development?</i>						

Figure 2. One section of the checklist



Figure 3. A fictitious example of a net diagram generated by the tool

the region, for example, as a starting point for a detailed discussion on the regional situation. With the help of the evaluation results, regional actors are able to identify the most important gaps and the steps to be taken: in our fictitious example, regional actors should try to identify new, strong partners along with persons who might act as regional promoters.

Evaluating the process with this method on a regular basis makes it possible to identify the progress or the regress of the regional development. To avoid possible misjudgements of the self-evaluation tool, it has to be emphasized that this method should not be understood as a "hard" research tool generating quantitative data for social research. The method is meant as a tool used by rural development initiatives without much training that is able to deliver an overview of the sustainable development processes in a region at a given time. Different aspects of such processes can be visualised to identify aspects of the rural development process in need of improvement. The fact that the scaling of the questionnaire does not aim to measure the opinions of social actors complying with the requirements of quantitative social research, but rather to generate an impression of a regional situation in short time makes it helpful for regional development practitioners.

## Conclusion

A strong advantage of qualitative indicators for the evaluation of the success of sustainable rural development processes is that research designs are able to take factors important for the realisation of new forms of governance into account. As the realisation of new forms of regional governance is the central aim of a state-of-the-art rural development policy, such process-orientated success factors must be integrated into an evaluation design.

In principle, the self-evaluation method presented here is adaptable to all forms of cooperative rural development processes, although it was developed against the particular background of the EC community initiative LEADER+. In Germany, this method is now applied within the similar political regional development program "Regionen Aktiv" ("Active Regions"), which forms part of the German sustainable development strategy. In the latter case the supported regions *have* to evaluate their processes by using this method.

Many scholars discuss the functions of policy learning and network management vis-à-vis the realisation of new forms of regional governance (Benz/Fürst 2002, 31). The present evaluation research design aims to take such "modern" aspects of regionalisation theory into account by formulating factors which are deemed necessary for the successful development of regional networks and – through cooperation with a consultant – for the establishment of a method of self-evaluation that can later be used by the regional actors to manage regional development independently. The evaluation as a whole therefore aims to implement a modern form of transdisciplinary and participatory regional development strategy. Participation signifies that rural actors have been involved in developing the method of self-evaluation. As broad participation lies at the centre of

many of the success factors it forms one key elements of successful regional governance. Transdisciplinarity goes one step further: It signifies that methods have been developed by scientists and practitioners together by integrating both scientific knowledge of regional governance and the knowledge of the local practitioners themselves in order to develop a strategy that combines the “best of both worlds” and which achieves a wider acceptance amongst rural actors. This reflects the changing understanding of policy advice within modern policy analysis. Following this view the notion of technocratic policy advice carried out solely by scientific experts becomes impossible, and their cooperation with citizens primordial, as it is required in order to be able to develop and to improve policy measures which are able to be understood, accepted and implemented by the actors themselves.

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**Notes**

- 1 I thank the participants of Working Group 1 of the XI World Congress of Rural Sociology and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.
- 2 LEADER+ carries on two previous LEADER programs (LEADER I, 1991-1993, LEADER II, 1994-1999). The community funding for LEADER+ represents approximately 1% of the whole funds of the EU structural policy (2000-2006).
- 3 In Germany, 148 LEADER+ regions exist, which, until 2006, can get up to 247 Mio Euro to promote their different sustainable rural development strategies.
- 4 The regions were: "Rügen", Mecklenburg-West Pomerania; "Uckermärkische Seen", Brandenburg; "Thüringer Wald", Thuringia; "Naturpark Dübener Heide", Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, "Isenhagener Land", Lower-Saxony; and "Südlicher Steigerwald", Bavaria.
- 5 The checklist and the Excel file can be downloaded (in German) at [http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov\\_chck.pdf](http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov_chck.pdf) (checklist) and [http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov\\_ausw.xls](http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov_ausw.xls) (Excel tool).