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Quo vadis ?

How to measure the quality of sustainable development processes on local and regional level: The 'SQM' approach.

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Abstract:

Today numerous activities which seem to be sound, cosy and helpful – or sometimes simply useful – are called ‚sustainable‘. At the same time the requirements for measuring sustainability increased rapidly. Many different systems of indicators and conflicting opinions about the adequate approach characterise the recent discussion. Nevertheless we add another system with the specific approach to measure the process quality of sustainable development on local and regional level. In our opinion it is capable of adding substantial benefit to the concept of sustainability.

The framework in which this system of ‚sustainability quality management‘ (SQM) has been developed is closely coupled with the regional Agenda 21 process in the Lake of Constance- region, as already presented at the 40th ERSa Congress 2000 in Barcelona. Together with a network of 13 regional contact points in Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Principality of Liechtenstein the SQM had been developed, discussed and field-tested.

Key words: *sustainability, Agenda 21, quality management, development processes, transdisciplinarity*

What to measure when measuring sustainable development?

The overall system of SQM consists of three basic stages with loose analogy to the model of total quality management. We distinguish between:

- The assessment of the quality of development processes in terms of organisation, methodology, contents and legal demands. *This section will be the main part of our presentation.*
- The assessment of the quality of the implementation: Evaluation of projects with respect to material, procedural and ethical implications. The conceptual framework is translated into an evaluation checklist to systematise the discussion of the character and general impact of a given project or programme. The methodology of this stage was presented at the 39th ERSA Congress 1999 in Dublin and until now it has been applied in different phases and fields.
- The assessment of the state of the region which actually is a 'work in progress'. It will combine elements of 'top-down indicators', deduced from the international and national discussion of the CSD-scheme, with elements of regional specific indicators based on a bottom-up approach which defines regional specific goals of development according to a transdisciplinary approach of how to experience the local and regional space.

How to measure when measuring sustainable development?

The SQM-project's methodology is largely based on self-evaluation. External expertise is limited to the definition of minimum standards (see 3. below) and the facilitation of the evaluation process. It's operation starts at an early stage of a development process and accompanies the activities over the whole process life-cycle. Four principles form the basis of the evaluation process:

1. The people concerned are the experts. They are actors and target groups of the initiated learning process.
2. The focus of the SQM is laid on credibility and transparency.
3. Development processes need a minimum of quality. The minimum requirements are fixed.
4. The quality management methodology can be applied in a flexible way to allow the assessment of different processes according to the community's main focus.

Different types of indicators

The recent discussion brought up numerous indicator systems with different approaches on how to use indicators to measure or assess sustainable development. Two major differences can be observed:

- What should be measured: the type and orientation of projects, the appropriateness of processes, or the state of a place, an issue or an institution with respect to sustainable development?
- The reason why indicators will be used: to define goals according to existing deficits, to review the achievement of objectives, to compare the sustainability of regions or to motivate actors for action?

Four different types of indicator systems for regional development policies can be distinguished:

1. The indicators of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and various deductions: → they include the assessment of the state and development of an area as it is given in the DSR-approach; they are oriented towards comparability and benchmarking
2. indicators to assess specific goals with local orientation → they also include statements about state and development but they are related to specific goals, often using a combination from statistical available and empirical collected data.
3. indicators concerning processes of local or regional agenda 21 processes → a new trend is the assessment of the processes of agenda 21 which means a new orientation towards quality management
4. thematically oriented indicators → In addition a lot of thematically oriented indicators are developed in order to give instruments in different sector-oriented policies (e.g. tourism, land-use planning, energy, etc.)

It is therefore crucial to clarify the goals and objectives of investigation before starting any assessment with indicators. An example:

- If the main objective of using indicators is to get an overall assessment of the state of sustainability of a specific community or region, the first type of indicators can be used. It allows to get a rough estimation on the state and allows comparison with any other community or region. Following this initial assessment of the state, definition of the fields for urgent action could be a next step.

- If specific and descriptive goals for the development of a certain community or region have already been formulated, you will choose the second type of indicators because very specific indicators will be needed to evaluate the achievement of specific goals. For example, if the regional actors have decided to develop the region towards a 'pole position' in the promotion of slow mobility, indicators like the length of bicycle pathways or the average distances between household and working place are needed and the specific data collected.

The different modus operandi not only represent different types of measurement but also include different strategies in the field of regional development.

The approach of the Lake of Constance- Region

In the Lake of Constance- Region different goals and objectives have to be combined to gain results concerning the grade of sustainability of the regions development.

1. The different political cultures and structures in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the Principality of Liechtenstein brought up different types and approaches of 'Local Agenda 21'- processes. Three examples:
 - citizen-participation is an important part of 'Local Agenda 21'- processes in Germany. In the Swiss democratic system such processes are state-of-the-art in the political 'everyday life'. Hence the definition of a common standard and understanding of the quality of development processes and the common term 'Local Agenda 21' needs much more efforts.
 - one of the main differences on the local level is the utilisation of 'mission statements' as strategic goals for future development. In German communities the need for 'mission statements' almost causes 'allergic reactions' while in Swiss and Austrian communities such common-ground-guidelines especially for sector oriented policies are a well established instrument.
 - in Germany it is courteous to come to the political decision to establish a 'Local Agenda 21'. In Vorarlberg district the phrase 'Local Agenda 21' has hardly attracted any interest among the communities in the past 10 years. They work with topical programmes to save energy, to support local economies, to propagate the role of families, etc. leading to at least the same effects. But the phrase 'sustainability' or 'Agenda 21' has been assessed as too abstract and bulky to be used for local and regional development.
2. On the other hand we find a lot of concrete projects and a broad spectrum of solutions for problems in different fields of local and regional development. The situation around the Lake of Constance is characterised by three different cultures. Each country uses its own networks of experts, mechanisms of decision making, political strategies and institutions of research and

(further) education to deal with the specific problems in the different policies. Bringing together the approaches and models already created a very innovative setting of local and regional development. But also the discussion on the quality of different approaches gains importance.

3. Most difficult is the question of the 'state of sustainability' of the region. It depends not only on different overall objectives in policies (i.e. for example agricultural policy, transport policy and so on) but also on different basic conditions in geography, economy and so on. And it depends on the dominating influence of institutions of research and consultancy in each country. Therefore the question of quality and indicators can be stated a political as well as a scientific question.

Dealing with this preconditions a set of different types of indicators combined seems to be helpful, as explained above. Such a system on the one hand clarifies the bundle of goals the indicators should be used for. On the other hand it disburdens the discussion about 'sustainable quality' from political implications at least on the level of projects and processes.

Therefore, we are focussing at the moment on the indicators to assess the quality of communal (and in parts regional) development processes, to establish a common ground of quality and to connect the 'good practices' in different policies.

The origin of the SQM-approach

The initial steps of the SQM- approach had been developed by the Office for Future- Related Issues at the Regional Administration of Vorarlberg District, Austria. In a situation, where numerous projects and programmes with the perspective of sustainable development within the federal state of Vorarlberg had been developed and implemented, four questions concerning the multifaceted activities arose:

- Who has an overview on all the activities towards sustainable development?
- Are we doing the right things (in sense of effectiveness)?
- Are we doing the things in the right way (in sense of efficiency)?
- How can we manage and secure the quality of the development?

With the objective of answering those four questions, institutions with different thematic and political background formed the platform "Unternehmen.V". The objective of this platform is to interlink different approaches, expertises and programmes to achieve interdisciplinary learning and action.

The platform presently consists of 8 institutions from the fields of social care, society, international development, economy, industry, ecology and energy efficiency. To enhance outreach and dissemination of results and achievements the platform established an internet-tool in which

different modular programmes under the perspective of sustainable development are launched, and interlinked with a large database for good practices towards sustainable development. The first modular programme established, applies the SQM-approach on communities and municipalities in the federal state.

The objective of this programme is to secure quality of communal sustainable development, rendering support to achieve sustainable development, and creating public awareness on sustainable development and the how to achieve it.

These three objectives are met by three different phases of the programme:

- Assessing the quality of the development process: Based on a large checklist with a set of process criteria (see below) and a strictly defined minimum standard for the status “LA21 candidate and LA21 community”, communities representatives can assess the state of their process quality.
- Evaluating the sustainability of the implementation: Reaching the minimum level of “LA21 candidate”, a community gains access to a simple evaluation tool which generates a basic profile of the implementation status concerning sustainability (see graph below). The profile mirrors the results and effects of different projects within the four spheres Local Economy, Environment, Social welfare and culture, and global responsibility.
- Managing the quality of sustainable development continuously: The profile and its evaluated projects are published on the internet-platform <http://www.unternehmen-v.at> and are incorporated into the good-practice-database. An included automatic formalism reduces the effects of the evaluated projects on the sustainability profile according to the time passed since publishing the project. This encourages communities to enter into a continuous process of improvement.



The following sections put the major focus on the first step of this process, assessing the quality of the development process.

The system of process indicators

A region-wide evaluation of successful examples of communities with ongoing processes of sustainable development, brought up a set of process-indicators as summarised below:

Area:	issue	minimum standard
organisational criteria	coordinating group:	The development process will be accompanied by a group of actors. The group represents a broad spectrum of citizens. It has own resources and is able to initiate first steps of implementation.
	information and political awareness:	Information about the development processes is spread by local and regional media. There is an official event (opener) and regularly public meetings. Also the input by experts is common.
content criteria	integrated approach:	According to the concept of sustainability economic as well as ecological questions, issues of social fabric and global relations are part of the development process.
	mission statement...	There exists a mission statement which is substantiated by goals and measures. The statement has been discussed in a participation process.
	... or a sectoral beginning:	If there is no overall mission statement in sense of sustainability a sectoral beginning in two of the four issues of the integrated approach could be done. The discussion of how programmes and projects concern the other two issues is obligatory.
methodological criteria	participation of citizens:.	Different groups of interest are involved and have the opportunity to discuss and to work together. The access to all people is easy and at any time possible.
	orientation towards processes:	There is a clear statement which emphasises and open-end development process.
	evaluation of process:	There are periodical discussions on the success in reaching the formulated goals. The discussions take place in different boards and bodies, the results will be published.
formal criteria	tasks for local politics:	The municipal council formulates an official statement to start the development process.
	the tasks for the administration:	The local administration cultivates the flow of information to the working groups and the broad public
	regional activities:	There exists a regular exchange of information and experiences with other communities.
	interregional activities:	Also good practices will be published in an appropriate way to be used by other actors. The development process integrates a perspective of global responsibility within all activities.

What is to be done to reach a real quality management

The presented approach is aimed at a model of quality management for local and regional sustainable development. Three next steps are planned:

- To add a system of indicators to assess the state of the region with respect to sustainability. We will start with the issue of spatial planning.
- To enlarge the process indicators towards other target groups like business and private households.
- And to redesign the framework towards an integrated system of quality management

The third step will use the European Model of quality Management in enterprises. EFQM is aimed at identifying the strengths and potentials of development in economic organisational units. The main question is how to improve the existing potential and what kind of process is needed therefore. EFQM does not concentrate only on existing strengths and potentials; this kind of analysis is retrospective while looking at the results of the past. In the centre of regard is the 'how to do' to improve the state-of-the-art. Above all in most cases facts and results of development processes will be stated. But it is much more difficult to describe how the things had and have to be done.

The model of EFQM is structured in two parts: The results are the one part – what are the results of the efforts in the perception of customers, contributors, the organisations and the society? The other part is the part of the 'enablers'. It can also be called 'ways and means'. This part of the quality management contains activities and procedures, approaches and strategies including resources, networking and the role of leadership.

To use this model to formulate 'windows of opportunity' of regional sustainable development seems to be a generative approach.