

EXPERIENCES AND DILEMMAS OF STRATEGIC ACTION PLANNING IMPLEMENTATION ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

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In the paper are specifically analyzed and discussed experiences and dilemmas in the process of strategic development programming which appeared in West Balkan Countries during the regional and local development projects implementation. The main critical framework conditions regards to Impediments on a Local level connected with different structures which led to different experiences, successes and problems; Accuracy and relevance of data and information; Institutional competence; Consideration of horizontal and vertical relations of local community which neglect their required active role in the development process; Financial restrictions as a considerable bottleneck for successful development planning upon unstable resource flow; Political culture norms and values; and The role of external experts and improvement of the above mentioned aspects which will enhance the situation of development planning at the local level in a sustainable manner. It is concluded that the various aspects are strongly interrelated and are forming a spider net with the object of the development process, the municipality, the town or the city. It is also concluded that the success of development efforts of the subordinated administrative levels depends to a high degree on adequate framework-conditions, which have to be formed and fostered at the superior level.

Key words: local development, strategic development programming, institutional structures, sustainability

IMPEDIMENTS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Any sustainable development requires adequate structural conditions to initiate and to foster the development process, to realize development efforts and business investments. The existing extent of such conditions at the local level as the main operational level in a decentralized political and administrative system, can be portrayed as being mostly inadequate and unsuitable. Though the will of quite a number of decision-makers and, moreover, professionals to start a sustainable development process is present, very often the existing conditions leave them helpless. This leads to ad-hoc-activities, non-transparent decision-making processes, financial insecurities, cementation of personalized and thus weak communication structures, hesitation to take final responsibility, etc. Because of the deficiencies in crucial fields,

the local authorities are in a position, which can be described well by the summary: "... because they can't do what they should do!"

Just to mention the most crucial aspects responsible for a widespread poor performance of development policy and development measures at the local level:

- without proper planning
- without sufficient implementation capacities (institutional organization as well as explicit and implicit knowledge)
- without financing calculations considering the real costs (esp. operational costs)
- without the support of different actors driven by short-term political purposes

These findings derived from experiences are showing interrelations of the different aspects (Figure 1).

As one can easily see, a wide range of components is affected, which shows clearly

the necessity to consider improvements in many different areas, when talking about fostering the decentralization process.

ACCURACY AND RELEVANCE OF DATA AND INFORMATION

The base for any development planning is accurate and relevant data and information available for the respective planning level. Without an accurate and relevant data and information base, proper planning is simply not possible, because no analysis can be done to the necessary detailed extent and quality. As a matter of fact, the situation in general reflects a low level of quantitative and qualitative information. Less surprising, this fact is - on an abstract level - well-known and accepted by the actors. More surprisingly is the situation in practice that the actors are convinced, even without disposing on reliable and traceable data and information, to be well informed on the relevant structures and the situations on

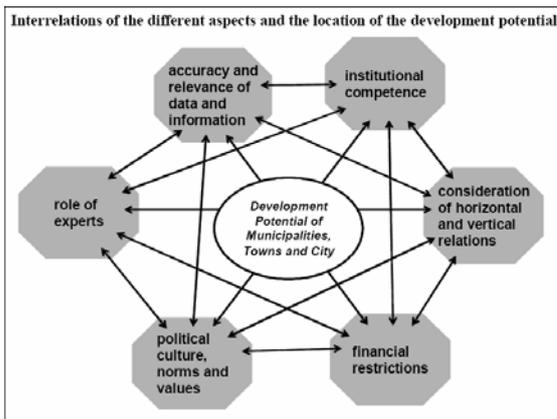


Figure 1. Interrelations of the different aspects and the location of the development potential

site. Further investigations result very often in the perception that the “good knowledge of the structures and the situations” describe more a subjective picture or a status, which is considerably out-dated.

The lack of accurate data and information prevents the necessary clarification of the real and actual situation. These circumstances are taken as a “shield” by many experts, because it is not or to a limited degree possible only to furnish the proof on the incorrectness or correctness of the picture produced by the experts. This leads to a neglecting of recent developments in economic, and even more important, in social and ecological conditions, causing the elaboration of wrongly focused, hardly feasible concepts.

The preparation of an appropriate statistical base asks for efforts, not only at local but also at central level, mainly in the provision of necessary institutional, methodological and financial means. Experiences show that data do exist somewhere and somehow, but are not accessible, not easy to process and no clear responsibility for the management of these data are given. As a consequence, planning is very often based on subjectively defined structures and relies on outdated information. The serious identification of visions, objectives and priority measures is difficult and neglects the factual development opportunities and development barriers.

INSTITUTIONAL COMPETENCE

The performance and operations of institutions were not assessed. Governmental and

administrative but also par-a-state institutions were established according to a “felt need”. What they did and how they did it, was more or less not questioned. Whenever a problem arose, the establishment of another institution (department, company, centre, etc.) was one of the first “solutions”. Even today, in many municipalities and counties a priority step is the formation of a development agency, entrepreneurial centre or similar institutions. In many cases, institutions operated without clear profiles, supervision and cost-efficiency-control. As a result, at each

level a remarkable number of public institutions exist. Thorough analyses, however, bring to light the low competence of the existing institutions.

Organizational, personnel and financial management as well as quality management do not exist adequately, if at all. Decision-making procedures follow person-oriented objectives. Very often, weal and woe of the performance depends on individual persons, who try to keep and strengthen their individual position. A phenomenon, which occurs on all levels, but shows extremely negative consequences at the local level, is the hesitation of many persons at responsible positions to really take on their responsibilities. Measures are not implemented, because the respective person in charge is not willing to cut the necessary decision and this means to take also the responsibility for failures. This hesitation is caused by little competence to prepare a decision properly and by a decade-long behavior that an official position serves first of all personal interests, what usually excludes the responsibilities for difficult decisions.

Another fundamental requirement of a well functioning administration or public / par-a-state institution is widely neglected until now: The top-management should delegate tasks and activities, but should keep the final responsibility. In reality, often the top-management in local governments, administration and public companies either do not delegate anything or delegate the tasks and

activities and the final responsibilities to subordinated levels.

CONSIDERATION OF HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL RELATIONS

A trend can be observed that local authorities consider their role in an inadequate way, i.e. in a very formal sense. They neglect their required active role in the development process. Their role is defined by the “Law on Local and Regional Self-government”. Many authorities conceive the given responsibilities as something that happens independently from the surrounding institutional setting, because of the biased view of their role. This setting includes actors of the civil society in the respective community and, what is even more critical because of the lack of mutual relationships, to institutions in neighboring regions. As a consequence, local authorities act without much contacts and communication with other actors, which leads to the abundance of existing chances and to the neglect of a possible increase of power by forming widespread consensus. So far, there was less need for local authorities to reconsider their role and their mode of operation, because of the lack of assessment and justification of the performance of institutions.

Whereas, structured horizontal relations are marked by isolation and neglect, the vertical relations can be described as a clear subordination of the local level to the central level. Caused by many constraints (financial dependency, legal insufficiencies, low competence, etc.), it is not possible to speak of a balanced relation or even of a functioning counter-veiling-principle, which is a prerequisite for successful development planning under the conditions of decentralization.

FINANCIAL RESTRICTIONS

Corresponding to the hierarchical vertical relation and with the lack of adequate by-laws regulating the practical operation of local government and administration, a considerable bottleneck for successful development planning exists, because of an unstable resource flow. The arbitrary situation in the availability of financial resources hinders the

government of many municipalities to plan in detail and to implement any development measure according to the medium-term programs. The base of genuine local revenues in many municipalities is by far too weak to allow the local authorities the implementation of measures for the development of their community. The dependence on allocation out of the central budget regulates the municipal operations. But the allocation of investment support follows often procedures made out of personal intentions and interest. Moreover, the present structure of the public-finance flow (the calculation of the share of central taxes like income tax) hinders the creation of a certain competition between the municipalities. This is a precondition for the design of innovative concepts for business promotion as well as for institutional structures and therefore for economic development.

Another critical aspect is the competence of especially small municipalities in managing their financial resources. Budgeting, exploitation of existing sources, careful and development-oriented spending of resources etc. have to be optimized to widen the room for operations at the local level.

POLITICAL CULTURE, NORMS AND VALUES

Decentralization is not the result of a single stroke with the pen in form of a law describing the (new) roles of the local and regional government. Effective decentralization depends on the functioning of mechanisms e.g. for the transfer of resources according to the defined responsibilities (connectivity), on competence and qualification of the human capital and, not at least, on the maturity of politicians, political parties and the civil society as a whole. This means decentralization has to grow from the bottom, supported by the preparation of adequate frame-conditions by the superior levels.

The well functioning of the decentralized society is a precondition for the fulfillment of obligations. But the political culture as well as given norms and values of many actors at the local level hardly coincide with the requirements of successful decentralization. Joint adequate norms and values shared by the various stakeholders and interest-groups at the

respective level are difficult to reach, because of the still existing personal relations of the various actors independent from the local political and administrative territory, which is to become the most important level to operate. The missing identification with the political and administrative unit, as the main channel for development, leads to a lack of broadly accepted norms and values.

A problematic phenomenon for successful strategic development planning at the local level is the existing weak political culture. Political culture stands for the ability of the politicians to fully accept the existence of political opposition as a requirement of democracy and of the necessity to coop with the various interest groups, even if contradictory positions are held. An offensive challenge by opponents and an open dispute with them – a basic principle of democratic political culture – is avoided as far as possible.

Also as a part of the political culture, the commitment of the politicians can be stated. Agreements and consensual concepts are very often not seen as issues in the responsibilities of the respective politicians. Lack of ownership hinders a consequent and coherent realization of necessary measures and initiatives.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL EXPERTS

A crucial aspect in the entire process of development planning – programming, implementation and evaluation – is the role of external experts. For decades, strategies, concepts and development programs were made by experts coming from central institutions like state research institutes, universities, etc. Most of the studies were prepared, often also based on decisions of the central government, with little or even without the involvement of actors at the local level. External experts were very often accepted as “representatives” of central state institutions, dealing with academic approaches showing little consideration of the real living conditions and the interests of the local population. The elaborated concepts lacked hints for implementation, which was not seen as an obligation by these experts. A clear distinction between programming and implementation was made, basing on the involvement of different actors and different responsible

authorities. The status of the external experts was more connected to the scientific competence than to consultancy competence. As a result, the products delivered were more scientific based studies than feasible development concepts based on actual and specific local structures. The backing of studies on national data and scientific theories led to ubiquitous studies showing little or sometimes no reference to the specific local situation, which should be the target area of the expertise. As a consequence, at the local level experts are often considered as somebody not really dealing in the interest of the local community, but in the interest of the superior government level. Efforts are necessary to define the role of external experts in a new light, namely to act in favor of the local level and to shift from scientific-biased studies and theory-oriented concepts to practical consultancy.

The task of the experts is to make use of the local knowledge, to assess the information, to prepare recommendations and to enable the local actors to deal with the information and the recommendations. A qualified and accepted expert, though engaged in the elaboration of specific tasks, is easily – more or less directly – approached by the local government to act as a “house and home” consultant, who is asked to advise the local government in more and more matters of various nature. The risk for the experts exists that they become “occupied” by the client: This will lead – sooner or later – to a situation, when the experts simply can not say no! As long as the responsibilities for political decisions are kept away from the expert, the situation is quite clear and unproblematic. But, if the responsibilities of political decisions are shifted to the experts (“the expert decided and we are just following this recommendation”), the role of the experts has to be seen as a very critical one. Any political involvement of experts will endanger the neutrality, the reputation, and therefore the long-term success of the consultancy.

A crucial aspect of external experts, whose impact is underestimated in many cases, is their role as “catalysts of changes”. External experts can much easier promote new ideas than local experts and can foster the

acceptance of another perspective and new thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

The improvement of only one or few of the above mentioned aspects will not enhance the situation of development planning at the local level in a sustainable way. The various aspects are strongly interrelated and form a spider net with the object of the development process, the municipality, the town or the city in the centre (see Graphic Interrelations of Development Potentials). Any interventions must consider these interdependencies; technical assistance in the field of local or regional development has to be accepted as a comprehensive, integrated approach based on long term involvement. In the sum, the barriers for successful development are manifold and sustainable them-selves.

Crucial components of decentralized development planning are at present not considered or not clarified to the necessary extent. Those components are:

- decentralization of decision making processes;
- inter-municipal cooperation;
- integration of the different fields of policy;
- co-operation of the different actors.

It can be summarized that the potential for structural, political and therefore economic innovations is limited at the local level. Innovation in this context should not be understood as technological innovation of whatever type; innovation stands for improvement and modernization of institutions, services, policies etc. The lack of innovation potential hinders the improvement of the situation according to the need of increased responsibilities at this level as a logical impact of decentralization. Any decentralization policy has to consider the ability of the local level to manage the requirements of the new, additional obligations. The process of development planning shows clearly that considerable system-immanent difficulties at the local level exist to respond to the political approach of decentralization. The consequences should not be to stop or even to turn back the present efforts for strengthening the local level, which is the main operational level of the various actors for (economic) development. But the consequence has to draw to reconsideration of the present framework-

conditions for decentralization, to assist the municipalities in the recognition of the critical aspects and to show ways for necessary improvements. If the actors at the local level cannot bear the burden, the success of development of the municipalities and regions has to be accepted as being weak and uncertain.

One of the most interesting lessons learnt is the fact that institutional structures at the local level – government, administration as well as civil society – do not allow leaving the actors alone after finishing one step or another. Moreover, an ongoing consultancy is necessary to ensure a successful implementation of the process. Even if respective local actors (e.g. civil servants) can conduct a specific step after some training and qualification, for most local actors the consideration of next steps, their interdependencies to former and forthcoming steps, and thus the character of a planning process, is new. In general, they are unfamiliar with this planning logic. So any consultancy dealing with strategic development planning at the local level has to consider a long-term involvement. This is also necessary to avoid the rising of expectations, which can not be fulfilled ("false promises").

In general, the start of the consultations at the local level leads to an enormous raise in the expectations of the public, expectations which are often beyond reality and thus of feasibility. Ongoing consultancies should also try to channel expectations, to avoid an early demotivation and to ensure a process, which is based on feasibility and appropriate procedures.

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