

Participatory policy evaluation as an innovative method for achieving sustainable rural development

Michael Böcher*

Abstract

This contribution presents the design of a current research project granted by the German Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture. It deals with establishing local partnerships in six German rural regions subsidised within the scope of the EC initiative for rural development (LEADER+). The aim of the research is to develop an innovative process-orientated self-evaluation method for sustainable rural development by including local knowledge. This participatory method has been developed in common with rural actors, a consultant and the institute of forest policy. The research consists of two parts: On the one hand, the institute of forest policy as evaluator investigates – based on public policy analysis – the implementation of LEADER+ in the regions and informs the consultant and local actors constantly about the interim findings of this ongoing evaluation. The intention is to provide all the information the consultant and the regional stakeholders need to manage the regional development processes successfully. On the other hand, a consultant advises the rural stakeholders and together with the representatives of local partnerships a computer-assisted management method has been developed. As a result this method, which is also available online, can also be used by other rural regional development initiatives to manage their sustainable rural development process by themselves in a more successful way. The contribution will present the general evaluation research design and the computer-based method for self-evaluation of regional development initiatives. It also will discuss potential problems of such a participatory research design by presenting important empirical findings of the research.

1 Introduction

This paper presents the design of a current evaluation research project that is carried out by the Institute for Forest policy and nature conservation. The research project investigates the implementation of success factors for an integration of nature conservation in processes of sustainable regional development in six German rural regions. All these regions have in common that they get subsidies within the scope of the EC initiative for rural development (LEADER+). The research was granted by the German Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture (BMVEL).¹ This evaluation ties up with the former “Evaluation by success stories in nature conservation” (Brendle 1999, Krott 1999, Krott 2001). In this first step, the driving political forces behind the success of nature conservation projects were identified and analysed from an ex post-perspective (Brendle 1999, Krott 1999). Successful procedures were identified and analysed in order to gain political success factors helpful for stakeholders intending to improve nature conservation policy in Germany (Böcher/Krott 2002). This paper presents the general evaluation research design and the result of the research: a method for self-evaluation of regional development initiatives. It also will discuss some potential

* Georg-August-University of Göttingen, Institute of Forest Policy and Nature Conservation, Büsgenweg 3, 37077 Göttingen, Germany; email: mboeche@uni-goettingen.de

problems of this participatory research design by presenting important findings of the research.

2 The background of the research - the EU community initiative LEADER+

To promote processes of sustainable rural development, the European Commission established in 1991 the community initiative LEADER as an instrument for supporting rural development. Since 2000, the third LEADER programme, now called "LEADER+", supports rural areas all over Europe.² With LEADER+, the European Commission wants to promote regional development initiatives in rural areas. To get subsidies within the scope of LEADER+, local partnerships have to be founded and a regional action plan formulating an integrated, high-quality, original strategy for a special region has to be prepared in cooperation by local actors (infoBase Europe 2001, European Commission 2000). LEADER+ promotes the long-time development of rural networks rather than finance short-time investive development measures. So for the European Commission processes of communication and cooperation are in the centre of interest.

Regional initiatives have to define their regional context by themselves and to develop a regional action plan before they can submit an application for subsidies within the scope of LEADER+. A rural region is not longer determined by geographical or economic data, but by social networks that constitute and define "their" individual regional background for collective action: The EU wants to support pilot strategies, the development of new networks and new ways of supporting sustainable regional development. Participation, evaluation and a strong competition (only the best concepts get subsidies) 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 of LEADER+ reflects the current scientific discussion on new forms of governance in regional policy that focuses on the importance of regional cooperation and networks as good preconditions for a successful regional development stimulating policy-learning of rural actors (Benz/Fürst 2002). The concept of LEADER+ shows a "modern" approach to rural policy - the "good governance" criteria of the EU (European Commission 2001) are included, for example participation on all levels, sustainability, gender mainstreaming, transparency etc. Also normally (politically) weaker interests like nature conservation, youth or women have to be integrated into the regional action to get financial support - so LEADER+ can be a strong instrument contributing to a sustainable development in rural areas. Governance by LEADER+ means to connect the advantages of hierarchy (the EU rules for the program, the national programs for the implementation of LEADER+, the need of evaluation on different levels) with the advantages of self-coordination and network governance (the establishment of a bottom up-structure and the use of local knowledge on the regional level). LEADER+ is therefore a good example for the European system of multi-level governance. LEADER+ prescribes also the networking of all European LEADER+-initiatives on their national and on the European level: So the EU wants to stimulate processes of policy learning and transnational cooperation between rural regions (<http://www.rural-europe.aeidl.be>). In Germany, 148 LEADER+ regions exist, which, until 2006, can get up to 247 Mio. Euros.

3 The evaluation research - general aspects and methods of empirical research

The research project represents a policy evaluation dealing more with policy processes than policy outputs. Therefore, the evaluation is based on public policy analysis (Howlett/Ramesh 1995, Bussmann/Klöti/Knoepfel 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 those outcomes” (Kraft 1998, 299). That means that this evaluation does not measure policy outputs such as the creation of new jobs or enterprises. It is rather a question of the evaluation whether new forms of cooperation between social actors, new regional networks or regional policy learning processes are developing. The research design represents current approaches of regional governance research (Benz/Fürst/Kilper/Rehfeld 2000; Benz/Fürst 2002) that emphasize the significance of new forms of cooperation between regional actors with the intention of reaching sustainable regional development. One significant problem of these new forms of regional governance is, however, that cooperation is often demanded but not practiced, because of its costs. “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).

The research is more focused on the ongoing *policy processes* of regional development than on their results. The main question of our research is to find and to apply institutional and processional factors promoting a successful regional development. Such factors are widely discussed in the literature on regional policy and can be used for the evaluation research design. This evaluation design generally refers to the aims the European Commission wants to achieve with the Initiative LEADER+: The European Commission wants to promote the long-time development of rural networks rather than finance short-time investive development measures. So for the EC processes of communication and cooperation are in the centre of interest. Partners within this research are the University Göttingen as scientific evaluator, a consultant who advises regional stakeholders, and some core actors of six German LEADER+-regions ("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). The evaluation research integrates deliberately the regional actors, because they are able to endue detailed knowledge of the situation in their rural area. Therefore the whole research is designed in a participatory way to include local insider knowledge into the evaluation: This design corresponds with new approaches in public policy analysis that discuss the problems of technocratic professional expertise and the necessity of citizen participation 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).

Methodically, the research project is composed of the analysis of documents (for example regional development programmes, articles in the local press, etc.), qualitative interviews with regional stakeholders, and participant observations of regional meetings and workshops. Finally, there will be an extensive quantitative survey using standardised questionnaires.

3.1 The success factors as key elements of the policy evaluation

From a political scientist's view, new forms of regional governance based on cooperation between all relevant actors in a regional framework are without doubt central prerequisites, if a sustainable regional development is to be reached. But 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). Successful cooperation in order to reach a 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 change their individual behaviour for achieving the common good of sustainable development (Böcher/Krott 2002). New forms of governance to reach a sustainable regional development integrating nature conservation are not a given fact, but they have to be enforced in the political process. In this political process actors negotiate possible alternatives for regional development. Actors wanting nature conservation to become a central aspect of a strategy for regional development have to know which factors will enable them to reach their goals in the political process. It is not sufficient to formulate ideals of a regional sustainable development if we want to establish new forms of regional governance in rural areas. Rather, 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 our policy evaluation, **the path** to cooperation is the most important research objective. This path is connected with the ideal of formulating practical indicators which can help regional stakeholders to evaluate their own strategies and success in the future.

The following success factors serve as the basis of our evaluation research (see Böcher 2001 and Böcher 2002). At first, these driving political forces behind the success of nature conservation projects were identified and analysed from an ex post-perspective (Brendle 1999, Krott 1999). These factors were then used and supplemented with respect to an ex ante-evaluation of the general political conditions in six rural regions in Germany, all of which have submitted an application for subsidies within the scope of the EC initiative for rural development (LEADER+). For this first cycle of 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.

1) Pressure of problems

Regional actors have to feel a common pressure of problems that leads them to initiate a cooperative regional development strategy. This pressure of problems can be stimulated by "objective" problems, for example a high rate of unemployment or ecological problems like continuous floods, but has also to be felt by local actors in a subjective matter, so that they want to find a solution as answer to their regional problems.

2) Project-design that supports Win-win coalitions

For the reach of sustainable regional development, the tracing of win-win-coalitions is one important condition of success. Actors are only willing to cooperate if their benefit from cooperation is higher than without. This means that, for example, agriculture and nature conservation have both to be winners within one concrete project if it is designed to build up cooperation between farmers and nature conservationists.

3) Short term success

Regional development projects, that are designed to realise short term partial success, are able to motivate actors, to persuade critics, and to build up trust towards the regional promoters of sustainable development. Therefore it is very important for local partnerships to use short term successes as a continuous promotion for the regional development process.

4) 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 concrete project is not too large. The feasibility of success for sustainable regional development processes increases if the process ties up with existing structures in the region or existing funding programs. Actors who want to establish a LEADER+-partnership are more successful if they integrate existing former rural development initiatives or take a look on existing regional development concepts for the same region.

5) Powerful interceders and partners

Sustainable regional development can be reached if powerful interceders and partners support regional development initiatives. Local partnerships are more successful, if they can win actors as supporters who are prominent in the region. 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).

6) Learning aptitude and exchange of information

It is very important for the establishment of regional cooperation if the involved actors on the local level are able to learn from each other in order to get over potential conflicts in negotiations. On the national and the European level, the EU supports with LEADER+ the networking of all rural areas to establish an exchange of information between similar regions to learn from each other by studying best practices of rural development. Another important point is if regional actors establish methods to self-evaluate their successes and failures within the implementation of LEADER+.

7) Transparency, process competence, and flexibility

Process competence means to develop adequate strategies for analysing the underlying institutional conditions of the regional development process. It also means that regional actors must have knowledge about methods of conflict-solving. The structures of cooperation must be flexible and transparent – only then compromises can be made and learning can be facilitated.

8) Participation

Networks between social actors are the basis of sustainable regional development within LEADER+. If every actor in a region has a fair chance to participate, the regional legitimization of the network increases. This is very important as the actors organised in the local partnerships are not empowered to act as a representative due to a formal

democratic legitimation by an election. So local partnerships have to stay principally open to the participation of newcomers instead of establishing a "closed shop" constituted by the local elite.

9) 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 cooperative regional development processes, a special kind of core actors is important. These actors are regional promoters who possess the necessary detailed knowledge of the specific regional situation and of possibilities to get subsidies within political support programmes. Such actors lead the local partnership and bring out the core of the regional development network.

10) Critical mass of labour time and money for the regional management

Regional development projects cannot be started without actors investing time or money into the start up process. In this stage of regional development actors are important who work without the expectation to get paid for their obligation. In a later stage of the rural development process structures of regional management have to be established and to be financed.

11) Competent regional management

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

3.2 An example for the appliance of the success factors

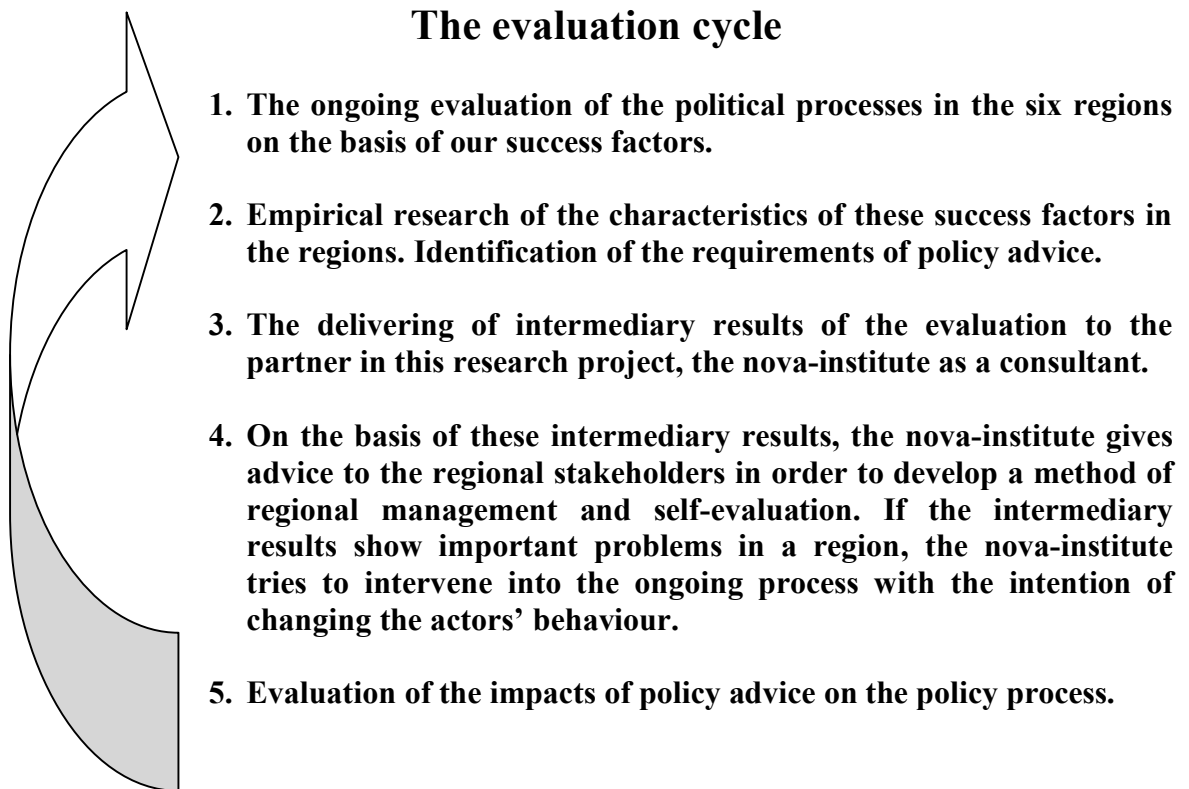
These success factors were used to formulate guiding questions for interviews with regional stakeholders. We asked the regional actors in the six regions for example, if they could identify some promoters of sustainability in the region in an initial stage of the development process. In all regions, the same core-actors were identified as promoters by the interviewed persons. These actors are described as persons who work for their ideals of reaching sustainable regional development without monetary interests. So this result shows the existence of policy entrepreneurs in the regions and points out the value of one of the success factors used for evaluation.

In another case the regional actors were asked, if every important sector is already integrated in the rural development partnership. In one of the six regions, all actors answered at the same time that the participation of local farmers is in need of improvement. So it was possible to evaluate the degree of participation of the different sectors in this stage of the process and to identify actors which still have to be integrated to satisfy the claims the EU formulates with LEADER+. On the basis of the success factors the main procedural problems every region have with implementing LEADER+ at a particular time could be identified.

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

These success factors were then used as a starting point of an ongoing evaluation for three years that consists of similar sequences of evaluation-cycles which are made up of the same steps (figure 1). This ongoing evaluation was made in cooperation with a consultant, the nova-institute for political and ecological innovation.

Figure 1: The evaluation cycle



Which advantages does this type of evaluation research offer?

One main advantage of such an evaluation research design is that results of an ongoing evaluation can be fed back into the political process again and again. The second advantage of this research design is the cooperation with a consultant who tests our recommendations in practice by advising the central actors of the regions. These promoters are key actors in the research: They are policy entrepreneurs 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 that regional promoters learn how to use a method of self-evaluation to realise the aims of the community initiative LEADER+. During common workshops the University of Göttingen as evaluator, the nova-institute as consultant, and the regional promoters discuss the next steps in order to find the "best way" of an intervening evaluation. So the results of scientific research can be used and modified for appliance in practice by using the help of practitioners, a consultant, and political science. It is important that the University Göttingen as the scientific actor, who initially formulated the success factors as basis of the whole evaluation, never advised the rural actors directly. This is very important, since it would be a big scientific problem to evaluate the implementation of suggestions made by ourselves without bias. Therefore, the University Göttingen evaluated the political

processes in six regions and delivered the intermediary results of the evaluation to the consultant who developed his policy advice by using our evaluation results. Only the consultant advised the rural actors directly.

The third advantage is that our evaluation results are regularly discussed with practitioners. This trans-disciplinary approach helps avoiding a very strong problem of policy advice: Many policy recommendations fail in practice because of their scientific language and because they are formulated in a way that can hardly be understood by social actors. The consultant discussed regularly the status quo of the LEADER+-implementation in the six regions with the regional actors. These discussions lead to a method of self-evaluation that bases on the success factors, but this method was formulated linguistically by the regional actors themselves. This procedure enhances the chance that this self-evaluation method is used by regional actors even if there is no consultant who works with the regional actors.

Which problems do evolve from this research method?

One methodological problem is the difficulty to measure the value of these more qualitative indicators to evaluate the political process. To avoid this, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of empirical research was used. We interviewed a large number of regional actors (promoters and critics) to avoid a misjudgement of the real regional situation which might appear if we only talked with some key advocates of sustainable regional development. We tried to combine an estimation of the actors by themselves with our theory-driven evaluation that is also based on the analysis of documents and articles in the local press. Finally, an anonymous questionnaire will be used to get the estimation of a large number of regional actors. The promise of anonymity should actors in particular motivate to formulate their true opinion on the regional development process. All of the empirical data are interpreted on the basis of political theory and public policy analysis. Thus this combination of methods of empirical research should avoid possible problems which could emerge with the use of only qualitative methods.

Another practical problem was that not every regional promoter involved in our evaluation research wanted to be advised in a way the consultant wants. 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. Therefore it is very difficult to convince them that using a method of self-evaluation in their daily work could lead to a better rural development process than just acting on instinct. Thus our self-evaluation method is most-suitable for appliance in such regions that do not have yet too many experiences with cooperative rural development processes. Particularly regional promoters who are not very experienced with regional development processes and want to start such a process in their region for the first time can benefit from this management method.

5 The result: a management method for the self-evaluation of regional development processes

The consultant started with the success factors and used regularly the results of the ongoing evaluation to advise the regional promoters of the six regions. In nine workshops, the regional problems were discussed and problem solutions were developed with the help of an 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

regional development concept or how to motivate other actors to participate. The policy advice consisted continuously in two parts: On the one hand, such present regional problems were discussed, on the other hand, a self-evaluation method was developed integrating the findings of these discussions. This combination of advising the regional actors concerning current problems on the one side and developing a long term method on the other side increased the contentedness of the participants with the workshops.

Generally, this self-evaluation method can be used by every regional partnership to estimate their success or to identify current problems which might emerge during the implementation period of regional development action.

The self-evaluation method consists in a checklist and a short manual. A small PC-based analysis tool (MS-Excel) completes the method (nova-Institut 2002).³ The checklist explains every success factor in short and formulates guiding questions concerning every factor. Concrete examples of 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: On the one hand it is possible for the regional manager to use this questionnaire to identify the core problems and the success of the regional development process. On the other hand, the questionnaire can be completed by all actors of the local partnership to get a comprehensive estimation of the status quo. The results of this survey can then be used to discuss potential difficulties of the regional development process and to identify possible problem solutions.

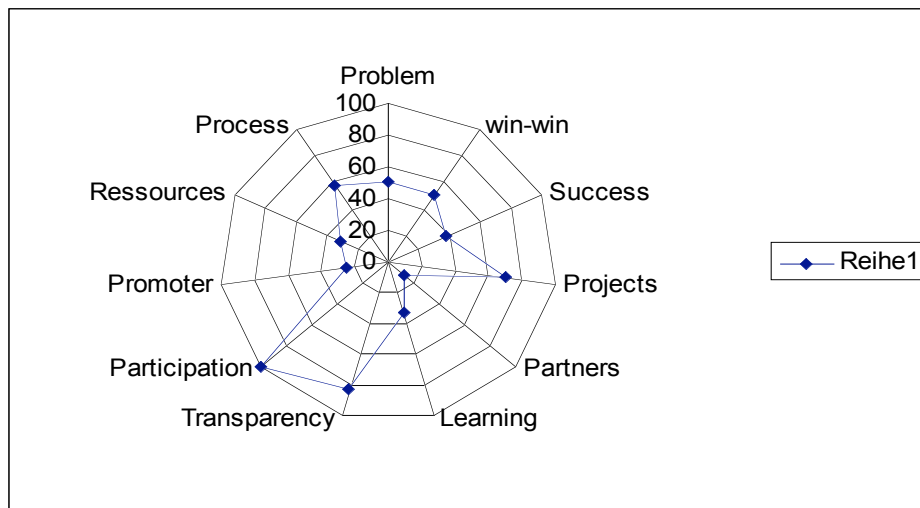
The following figure represents one section of the checklist and illustrates how this self-evaluation is designed. The respondents shall estimate the characteristics of every success factor by using a Likert scale. The additional guiding questions help them to understand and to think about every evaluative statement the questionnaire contains (*figure 2*).

Figure 2: One section of the checklist

1	Pressure of Problems and Will to find a solution	1	2	3	4	5
1.1	There is a certain pressure of problems in the region that is perceived in public.					
?	<i>What is the central problem in the region (for example high unemployment rate, decline of agriculture?)</i>					
1.2	There are actors in the region which are affected by the problem and want to find a solution.					
?	<i>Which persons or groups are affected? Which actor is affected in a way that he wants to invest time, money or engagement to work for a solution?</i>					
1.3	There are real possibilities to solve the problem.					
?	<i>Which solutions are available? How realistic are they? Are they accepted as a common way?</i>					
1.4	There is a strong regional identification that motivates regional actors to cooperate.					
?	<i>Do the citizens of the region identify themselves with the region, the regional culture or the regional nature? Does this identification take effect on the willingness to act in common for the regional development?</i>					

To analyse the questionnaire in an easy way, a PC-based (MS-Excel) tool is delivered with the checklist. By using this file it is possible to generate a net diagram in short time. The following figure shows a fictitious net diagram, generated by the tool (*figure 3*).

Figure 3: A fictitious example of a net diagram



This net diagram represents the situation of a region at given time. It shows a region that has problems with several aspects of the regional development process: On the one hand there are not enough strong partners, there is a lack of a strong regional promoter, and the resources for the process are still too weak. On the other hand, the participation of regional actors is good and the regional development process is designed in a transparent way. 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

in a very easy way. The generated net diagrams can then be used as slides for presentations in the region, for example to have a starting point for a detailed discussion on the regional situation. By the help of the results of this evaluation regional actors are able to identify the most important things and what to do next: In our fictitious example, regional actors should try to identify possible strong partners and should have to find persons who could act as regional promoters.

Evaluating the process using this method at regular intervals can identify the progress or the regress of the regional development - so it is easy to make up the balance of the regional development process constantly.

5. Conclusions

A strong advantage of using these qualitative indicators to evaluate the success of sustainable regional development processes is, that the research can take factors into account that are very important for the realisation of new forms of regional governance the European Commission wants to see. If realising new forms of regional governance is the centre of a state of the art -regional development policy, these process-orientated success factors have to be integrated into an evaluation design.

In principle, our self-evaluation method is adaptive to all forms of cooperative regional development processes, although it was developed against the special background of the EC community initiative LEADER+. In Germany, this method is now applied in the similar political regional development program "Regionen Aktiv" ("Active Regions"), that is part of the German strategy for the reach of sustainable development. Here the supported regions *have* to evaluate their processes by using this method.

Many scholars discuss the function of policy learning and network management to realise new forms of regional governance (Benz/Fürst 2002, 31). The evaluation research design this paper presented tries to take such "modern" aspects of regionalisation theory into account by formulating factors that can help to realise a successful development of regional networks and also integrate weaker interests like nature conservation, and - by cooperation with a consultant – to establish a method of self-evaluation, that can later be used by the regional actors to manage their regional development by themselves. So the evaluation as a whole tries to implement a modern form of transdisciplinary and participatory regional development strategy.

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Endnotes:

- 1 *BLE 00HS051 - "Politikwissenschaftliche Begleitanalyse von Prozessen nachhaltiger Regionalentwicklung in sechs LEADER+-Regionen" (2001-2004).*
- 2 LEADER+ follows on from two previous LEADER programmes (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 The checklist and the Excel file can be downloaded (in German) at http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov_chck.pdf (checklist) and http://www.leaderplus.de/downloads/free/nov_ausw.xls (Excel tool).