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PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF LOCAL AGENDA 21 PROCESSES¹

1 Abstract

Scientific publications on the evaluation of Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) rarely focus on the evaluation of processes, although this subject is relatively often treated in non-scientific reports. Our goal was to develop a tool for evaluating process characteristics of LA 21, which (1) can be applied by the steering group of a LA 21 without external professional help, (2) serves to evaluate the process of a LA 21, (3) helps to develop – in participatory ways – appropriate measures of process improvement if necessary, (4) meets the common methodological standards of evaluation, and (5) meets the criteria of «utilization focused evaluation» (Patton, 1997).

This approach is new because we consider all stakeholder groups as important sources of information and let them participate in the definition of the process goals and in the process assessment.

2 Introduction

There exists an enormous number of collections of «Best Practice» studies, of communal selfpresentations and recommendations for LA 21 (Behringer, 2002) – many are available on the web. But (participative) process evaluation for LA 21 is rarely found as subject of scientific research – we did not find any studies using «process evaluation» for literary research in any libraries. Some instruments are so called «based on experience» (e.g. Wiener & Rihm, 2001) and demonstrate very well the lack of and the need for well elaborated tools for the process evaluation of LA 21. We found Behringer's scientific study on participative procedures, but this study did not furnish an integrated process evaluation for LA 21 either. She mentioned as potentials for future improvement of process evaluation for participative procedures: (1) The enlargement of the group of people who participate in the evaluation; normally the evaluation is done only by people who are actively involved as coordinators or moderators but not the participants. (2) The depth of evaluation; evaluation shouldn't be based on short and subjective impressions, but rather on systematic and consolidated evaluation. (3) Better evaluation in terms of assessment; instead of collecting impressions at the end of an event where participants tend to repeat the statements of the previous speakers, there should be another way of collecting data. We add to these three potential improvements (4) the fact that the whole LA 21 should be assessed adopting the three potentials mentioned above. We developed our criteria based on the existing materials on LA 21 and literature from different disciplines. Which process criteria would motivate the participants and make them «happy» is a question that was not studied and will be the subject of further research.

¹ The tool which is described in this article has been developed and tested in a joint research project of ecos, Basel (Sandra Hettinger, Daniel Lehmann-Polleimer, and Daniel Wiener; www.ecos.ch) on behalf of the Association Local Agenda 21 (www.agenda-21.ch), and the Interdisciplinary Centre for General Ecology (IKAÖ) of the University of Berne (Alex C. Bauert, Ruth Kaufmann-Hayoz; www.ikaoe.unibe.ch). We are grateful to the Gebert Rűf Foundation (www.grstiftung.ch) and to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (www.deza.ch) for their financial support of the project.

Although it is not the subject of this article, a short remark on the effect evaluation of LA 21: no research has been done yet on the relation between an LA 21's process and its effect. We do not know, what kind of LA 21 process will lead to a maximum of sustainability on the economic, social, and ecological dimensions – maxima which would first have to be defined themselves. In discussions with people working as consultants for LA 21 you can hear quite often that they «know» what is best for the process and the effects, as well, and they usually concentrate on the ecological aspects.

Since the time we started in March 2002, other research groups began to work on this subject. We are sure not to know all actual efforts taken to develop a tool for process evaluation of LA 21. In this paper we will not discuss these approaches but concentrate on what is specific in our tool.

Our intention was to develop a tool for process evaluation that can be used by the participants of LA 21. It has to motivate the people to use it and give them the impression that they evaluate themselves to realize their own interests. For this aspects we do agree with Patton's concept of «utilization focused evaluation» (Patton, 1997). The different stakeholders of the process must be enabled to assess the process from their point of view and in accordance with their interests. This is in contrast to evaluation research concerning the LA 21 process, which does not serve the participants.

As any evaluation compares the results of the assessment with some reference value or concept – explicitly or implicitly – we introduced a way to help define the process goals explicitly. In this way, we are sure, that there is a valuable reference which is established either by the steering group representing the stakeholder groups, or by an assembly with the participants themselves. We would consider the latter, more participative way as more adapted to a LA 21. An alternative would have been to use a LA 21 standard which is discussed often on conferences in Switzerland and is also the base of the competition «Best LA 21 in Germany». As there is no base yet for defining such a standard LA 21, we do not agree with such concepts. even if people participating in LA 21's seem to express a need for such standards (personal report from different researchers and consultants).

3 LA 21 and participative process evaluation

Many concepts of tools for process evaluation agree on which aspects of the LA 21 process are to be considered as its constituents. We identified five domains of process design:

- goal setting
- communication
- participation and stakeholder involvement
- institutional embedding
- process organization

Most instruments refer to these characteristics, although they are sometimes called differently.

Important differences between concepts concern questions such as

- «who sets the goals for the LA 21 process?»,
- «who defines a good quality of a LA 21 process?» (is there a general LA 21 standard?),
- «who realizes the assessment?» (who answers to the questions?), and
- «what is done with the results of the process assessment?».

First we will answer these questions, as they are crucial for the understanding of a LA 21. The methods applied by the tool depend on these answers. We will demonstrate in this way how interdependent the understanding of what is a LA 21 and the methodology of process evaluation are. Most discussions about process evaluation tools for LA 21 reflect explicitly or implicitly these issues.

3.1 Who sets the goals for the LA 21 process?

There are many different definitions of what a LA 21 is. Many of them are explicitly or implicitly based on normative ideas about it. For us, a process can be called a LA 21 if its aims correspond to the general goals of sustainable development, as understood by the UN: Intra- and intergenerational scope, integration of economic, social and ecological aspects, and participative process. Because we think that all parts of a LA 21 should be participative, our answer to the first question «who sets the goals for the LA 21 process?» is that the participants should set the process goals (as well as the content goals) of the LA 21.

3.2 Who defines good quality for the LA 21 process?

As LA 21 differ in so many ways from place to place with respect to the institutional embedding, the initiators (administration vs. grass-root), the time, the participants (number, motivation, etc.), and the financial support, it is difficult to say that there is «one right way» to do a LA 21. Therefore, we are in favour of the idea, that every LA 21 has to define its own standards in form of process goals. By saying this, we don't mean that any participative process or consultation can be called a LA 21 in the sense of Rio'92. Scientifically based statements are possible about some aspects, for example «procedural justice» (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997). Procedural justice refers to «the employee's perception of the fairness of the decision-making processes used by organizational authorities» and can be considered a *conditio sine qua non* for the acceptance of a LA 21 by the participants of a LA 21. But there is no research about what makes «a good process» or which aspects of such a process have to be considered - we have no valid definition of such a process nor do we know how to measure it. This means that considering certain process aspects does not necessarily lead to a «good process». Therefore, we propose that every LA 21 sets its own process goals – with the support of our ProcessCompass, as we will show below – and then assesses the process some time later. The set goals and the results of the assessment are to be compared and then conclusions will be made on how to improve the process.

3.3 Who realizes the assessment?

Since a LA 21 is a participative process, the participants have to assess the LA 21 – and not, as often done, only the coordinators or an external consulting office. The latter way is often used, but it creates certain risks: coordinators and external consultants are highly interested in assessing the LA 21 in a positive way since it is the result of their work (and if they get money for it, they want to have another mandate from the administration). At the same time, such an evaluation provides information only from one point of view. In psychology of work and organisation, the importance of different points of view is well known and has led to the concept of the «360°-Feedback» (Scherin & Sarges, 2002). The 360°-Feedback means, that the superior of a person, as well as peers and subordinates assess the work in the following fields: Leadership, competence, and performance. We developed different questionnaires for different types of stakeholders, thus allowing for their different points of view. So the stakeholders – steering group, general public (participating or not in the LA 21, members of the executive, administration, political parties, organisations (all kinds), schools, adolescents – can all give their own feedback from their point of view. Additionally, we hoped by orienting the questionnaires to the interests of the stakeholders and by anonymising them, to minimise undesired effects such as social desirability.

3.4 What is done with the results of the process assessment?

In order to see the entire LA 21 as a participative process, we think, it is important that the results of the assessment are discussed and interpreted in a workshop of all participants (or at least representatives of them). The results of the assessment have to be presented together with the set process goals: Do the set process goals correspond to the perceived

process? How do the different stakeholders perceive the process and do they perceive it in different ways? Also, the results have to be interpreted, conclusions have to be drawn, and measures to improve the process have to be taken if necessary.

In the next part, we will describe concept, methods and contents of the instrument in more detail. We call our tool «ProcessCompass» as it is supposed to be helpful for directing the LA 21 process in the chosen direction.

4 The ProcessCompass

In the present research period we haven't yet developed the entire tool in detail, but most of it is realized. For each part of the tool, the goal and content are specified. You will find a short overview of the tool in table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the ProcessCompass. *Italics*: parts not yet fully developed.

ProcessCompass		
Chapter		Content
Introduction		General informations
Planning aid	Description of the main domains of the process	Description of the domains (goal setting, communication, participation and stakeholder involvement, institutional embedding, project organisation)
	<i>Guidelines for defining process goals</i>	<i>Guidelines for defining process goals with respect to these domains</i>
	<i>Checklist</i>	<i>Checklist for controlling whether the planned measures can lead to the defined goals</i>
Assessment tool		Questionnaires for the different stakeholders for the assessment of the LA 21 process, and guidelines for their analysis
Guidelines for organising an evaluation workshop		<i>Guidelines for a workshop where the set goals and the results of the assessment will be and discussed, and conclusions will be drawn. Furthermore, measures to improve the process have to be developed from this comparison. (In the pilot phase of the project, the project team did organize and moderate the workshop)</i>

4.1 Introduction

The introduction contains general information about the ProcessCompass as a usable tool, necessary knowledge for its adaptation – none except the readiness to read about 30 pages – and an overview of the tool. The tool should be applicable by the steering group of a LA 21 without external professional help.

4.2 Planning aid

This part consists of a description of the main domains of processes (goal setting, communication, participation and stakeholder involvement, institutional embedding, project organisation), guidelines for defining process goals with respect to these process domains, and a checklist for controlling whether the planned measures can lead to the defined goals.

The introduction to the **five domains of process design** covers what we suppose to be the aspects of a LA 21 which are to be considered when designing or evaluating the process. Within each domain we distinguish several process factors, and each factor contains of a number of specific features.

Goal setting: Formal goal aspects of goal setting, content goal criteria, participation during goal setting, and goal reaching monitoring.

Communication: Responsibility for the communication, knowledge and transparency by exchange of informations and public relations, contents of the public relation activities, channels used for the public relations, acquisition and exchange of specific knowledge, quality of the information, and marketing.

Participation and stakeholder involvement: Culture of participation in the LA 21, participating people and groups, networking between the participants, competences of the participants, and equal rights for the participants.

Binding force and institutional embedding: Institutional embedding, binding force of results and political decisions, acceptance and trustworthiness of the actors, transparency of the decisions, and coordination of LA 21 and administration.

Process organisation: Design of the process organisation, planning of the process, events, process evaluation, action program, and projects.

In the second part, the planning aid helps the steering group to prepare the discussion of the process goals which should be set in participation. It has to be decided, for example, whether in a LA 21 «participation» shall be a very important factor or not. The definitions of the process characteristics are presented in the same order as they appear in the questionnaires, to make it possible to compare them.

The third part of the planning aid is a checklist. We suppose the steering group of a LA 21 to be interested in having indications about whether the means they plan to invest are in realistic correlation with their goals. For example, if in a LA 21 they want almost all the population of a town to be informed about it, they will have to invest a lot of work, money and time to reach this goal.

4.3 Assessment tool

We mentioned above that we want to improve the evaluation by (1) enlarging the group of people who participate, (2) increasing the depth of evaluation, (3) using ways of collecting data. In addition to these three potentials we added (4) the fact that the whole LA 21 should be assessed. Now we will show, in detail, how we intend to do so.

(1) Since we perceive the LA 21 as a participative process, we want to include the different stakeholders in the evaluation; this will lead to the intended enlargement of the group of evaluating people. We don't ask them what their own criteria would be – which would of course be a useful step – but we ask them to judge the process according to our criteria, from their point of view. Therefore, we took the list with the process domains and factors mentioned above and elaborated questionnaires for the different stakeholder groups.

Although more groups may be added to the list of stakeholders, we think it is complete enough for most LA 21: steering group, general public (participating or not in the LA 21), administration, executive, political parties, organizations, schools, and adolescents (from 12 to the age of receiving political rights).

(2) We tried to add depth to the evaluation by a systematic and consolidating assessment. Instead of asking open questions at the end of events, we developed a set of questionnaires.

(3) To evaluate better, Behringer (2002) suggests more reliable assessments. Instead of collecting the impressions at the end of an event where participants tend to repeat the statements of previous speakers, there should be another way of collecting data. This reasoning is also used in our tool as we offer an anonymous way to answer questions.

As the three potentials to improve the process evaluation are applied to all aspects of the LA 21, we have also a positive answer to point (4).

4.4 Guidelines for organising an evaluation workshop

We propose that after analysing the questionnaires returned by the various stakeholders a workshop be organised with the following goals:

- to present the defined process goals (which should already be well known among the participants but might have to be recalled),
- to present the findings of the questionnaire assessment, including differences in process perception between the different stakeholders,
- to interpret the findings and draw conclusions, and
- to decide on potential measures needed to improve the LA 21 process.

5 Theoretical remarks

We did not present all the theoretical background underlying our concept of the process evaluation tool ProcessCompass, because there is not enough space in this article. We do, however, want to conclude with some theoretical remarks which seem particularly important to us. It would be desirable to work out a comprehensive literature review on reported know how about the process design of LA 21.

5.1 Participation to support sustainable development on a local level?

Participation has been introduced in the Agenda 21 of Rio'92 as a necessary element of sustainable development. We do not know any argumentation that supports that participative processes have any advantage to non participative processes for reaching the goals of sustainable development.

One could reason that, if a large number of people participate in a LA 21 and have to reach consensus about goals, these goals would usually not harm anyone, but at the same time would not contribute much to the overall goals of sustainability. Therefore, although participation has been considered in Rio'92 as a necessary element, it might slow down the development of sustainability in a community.

Today, it is difficult to demonstrate the advantage of LA 21 in comparison with other strategies to reach sustainable development. This leads us to the conclusion, that a LA 21 including participation might be a good thing to do when seen from a basic democratic point of view, but its positive effects on local sustainable development have still to be proved. Further research is needed.

5.2 Goal setting

We introduced the criterion «aspects of goal setting» with two aspects in mind: (1) do the goals integrate economic, social, and environmental goals according to the Agenda 21?(2) When setting goals, there are other criteria which have to be met for motivational reasons. The goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1992) says that goals should be concrete and of a moderate difficulty. Furthermore, these authors have found that goals are more motivating if those that have to realize them participate to the goal setting process. An important exception for LA 21's is the fact that participation in goal setting can be replaced by a goal set by a recognized authority which can also be a group of persons (Nerdinger, 1995). As a LA 21 is complex, the communication of the contents and the offer of target group specific events are very important to enable these people to participate to the decision making. This participation or presentation of set goals leads to a higher acceptance of the goals of the LA

21. So we ask in the questionnaires if special events exist for seniors, young people, woman and/or immigrants.

5.3 Gender

In our society, gender is still an important aspect of social injustice. This is indicated, for example, by the income and work statistics: In Switzerland, 52 % of the total work is done by women (35 % unpaid, 16 % paid), 48 % by men (18 % unpaid, 30 % paid). As a consequence, women receive only 23 % of the total income, although they do more than 50 % of the total work.

As a LA 21 aims at more social justice, including the emancipation of women, their participation under equal conditions should critically be supported. On one hand, women should be members of decision making committees as often as men. On the other hand, events should be planned in a way that women can participate – for example, by offering baby-sitting during the events – and that during discussions, interventions of women are as well accepted as those of men. A further important aspect is the question who is doing the non-paid work in the LA 21. Also, the steering group should have a good eye on who is working and who is deciding.

6 Research needs

As we have already mentioned, research is almost completely lacking on several important aspects of LA 21:

- What is known about process design (comprehensive literature review)?
- What makes an optimal process design?
- What is the relation between process characteristics and outcomes in terms of progress towards sustainability?
- Under which conditions do people want to participate in a LA 21, and what are their quality criteria?

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