

Success and constraints of implementing multi-level evaluation systems – the case of the GERMAN rural development policy programme “Regionen Aktiv”

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How evaluation systems have to be conceptualised within rural development policy programmes is currently discussed in different disciplines of regional sciences. To improve sustainable development processes and to help regional partnerships to achieve learning procedures new strategies and methods of evaluation in multi-level-governance systems are needed, which allow evaluating processes more than just to measure the outputs of policy processes. My contribution wants to discuss potential potentials and possible problems of establishing multi-level evaluation against the background of the German rural funding programme “Regionen Aktiv”. In 2001, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Production initiated a nation-wide competition by which eighteen model regions were elected and have been funded until 2006 by around 50 Mio Euro. The competition focused on objectives like strengthening rural areas, creating additional sources of income, creating a consumer view and providing environmentally compatible agriculture. These three basic elements of the programme have been implemented by a programme-based funding, network-governance instead of top-down steering and durable cooperation instead of temporal partnerships. The implementation of a bottom-up and multi-level evaluation system has been a core element in steering the competition. The partnerships were supposed to define their regional strategies or projects in advance, but also had to develop regional evaluation systems. Additionally an accompanying research was established for transferring knowledge from the programme management to the regions and vice-versa. This kind of multi-level evaluation system is innovative and can lead to different successes like the build up of process competence or strengthening the self-reflection of the rural partnerships. The installed knowledge transfer system allowed the programme management to recognise problems early in the process of the competition.

Nevertheless, two main problems during the implementation emerged and caused the evaluation approach and empowerment of partnerships to fail: (a) the regions had problems designing regional evaluation systems and (b) vertical communication problems within the multi-level system. The main reasons for these problems were:

- missing knowledge, experience and will in rural regions to running such evaluation systems
- the rules for evaluation formulated by the ministry were too soft at the beginning of the competition. Only after uniform evaluation rules were linked with annual reporting in a top-down manner each region began to implement this evaluation system.

My contribution shows that policy evaluation in the context of multi-level governance has to be implemented within the “shadow of hierarchy”. In this connection I want to show which conditions have to be fulfilled to establish multi-level evaluation systems successfully.