Regional Networking Meets Local Actions

A case study on the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 to examine the diffusion of knowledge to local actors

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Abstract: In daily politics the concept of sustainable development is one topic beside others. And in times of economic bottlenecks it may be not the most important topic. Local and regional Agenda 21- processes have to deal with mayor demands of the concept of sustainable development coming along with a minor political pertinence. To assess their effects it is necessary to know more about the political agenda- setting and the constraints and scope for development connected with.
The paper analyses the results of the seven years working period of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 from an internal point of view[1] referring to different theories, approaches and methods on regional governance, public opinion and empirical studies on LA21- processes.

The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 was promoted by the INTERREG- programmes of the European Union 2000 - 2006. In this time a working structure was established (chapter 1) and a lot of activities have been done to promote the concept of sustainable development and to support LA21- Processes within the Lake of Constance- region. Such kind of regional Agenda 21- process has to fulfil specific tasks, mostly connected with co-ordination and networking and with the exchange of best practices and tools (chapter 2). How these activities influence the regional development can be assessed with respect to concepts of regional governance and change management (chapter 3).

But what is the added value for the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in the region? To assess these effects of Agenda 21- processes it is necessary to know more about the political agenda- setting and the mechanism of public opinion as described by Luhmann (1971) from a systemic point of view (chapter 4). It is obvious that an Agenda 21- process can't reach its goals in a short time For this we have according to Luhmann to ask whether it was successful to establish the process by institutionalising its structures. To analyse the degree of institutionalisation the paper refers to some empirical studies on regional development and Local Agenda 21- processes (chapter 5).

This first rough assessment of the results of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 from an internal point of view will be supplemented by an external evaluation. The results of the evaluation will be available at the Easy Eco Conference in Saarbrücken.

[1] The author had the challenge to give professional support and scientific monitoring to the Steering Committee, the Executive B oard and the thirteen Regional Contact Points since 2000. A detailed report can be downloaded under http://www.alexandria.unisg.ch/Publikationen/Manfred_Walser/28790.

1. The organisational structure of the Lake of Constance Agenda 21

The initiator of the Lake of Constance Agenda 21 has been the International Lake of Constance (Conference of the heads of the government) as the political responsible body. An elaborate working structure was established.

1.1 The Steering Committee

Die Steering Committee is the political responsible actor and therefore most of the members are high-ranking (with respect to the regional level) actors from politics and administration. The commitment of its members depends on personal attitudes and the relevancy of the issues according to their daily work. The members of the Steering Committee meets twice a year and decides about the main topics, events and target groups and get the report on ongoing activities. For them it is important that the project go off without a hitch. The project should have a good public reputation and should be successful according to their individual criteria of legitimisation.

1.2 The Executive Board

The Executive Board is responsible fort the implementation of the project and needs a lot of competencies in all parts of project management to head the Regional Contact Points, to administrate the budget, to organise the networks to keep the contacts, to do the marketing and so on. It pulls the strings and cooperates with the Regional Contact Points as a 'primus inter pares'. The Executive Board is entirely involved in the development of key activities, goals and performance requirements together with the Regional Contact Points. The drafts will be presented to the Steering Committee and in most cases agreed with only slight modifications. The Executive Board has a broad scope to develop the project but has to legitimate the work twice, to the Steering Committee and to the Regional Contact Points. Beneath all the Executive Board often is the first contact of the public.
The most important task of the Executive Board is to act as a 'communication node' between Steering Committee and Regional Contact Points which needs the translation and integration of two different kinds of logic: The logic of projects and issues on the bottom and the logic of politics and administration on the top.

1.3 The Regional Contact Points

Die Regional Contact Points act as the basis and operative elements of the project. They work on their own responsibility as they are successful in fulfilling their tasks. Their most important task is to bring the concept of sustainable development 'down to earth'. Within the common developed goals and measures they have a lot of sovereignty. They organize how engaged regional actors can meet the project with its chances and possibilities and support local activities with information, events, competitions, advice and so on. Their tasks are located between creative design and service.
Also the Regional Contact Points act as an interpreter between the ideas of the project 'Lake of Constance Agenda 21' and the ideas and projects of single actors. This means to deal with different interests and needs a lot of competencies to integrate the different needs. They also have to legitimate the regional project of spreading information and services and creating awareness with respect to the concrete local initiatives.

1.4 Scientific support

The Scientific Support works twofold: it is the professional support of the activities on the one hand and the scientific monitoring of the 'work in progress' on the other hand. The Scientific Support is very closely connected with the project management of the Executive Board. Reporting to the Steering Committee and moderating the Regional Contact Points are also important tasks.

2. The tasks and activities of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21

According to a pre-study in 1999 and the decision from the responsible heads of governments the goals of the lake of Constance- Agenda 21 are networking, information / awareness raising and the support of Agenda 21- structures and projects. Main activities to meet this goals has been:

- Seminars and symposia dealing with a broad range of topics: from participatory planning to the Slow Cities- movement and from the perception of the regional space to the use of sustainability indicators,
- several competitions - on sustainable projects, a web-based paper chase for young people, a videotape and a music contest,
- documentations and marketing brochures and a homepage and
- a lot of internal workshops.

A special emphasis was given to the transborder exchange of experiences and ideas and to young people and local communities as important target groups of the Lake of Constance-Agenda 21.

Agenda 21- processes at the regional level predominantly deal with cooperation and networking while Local Agenda 21- processes to a greater extend deal with concrete projects and citizens participation. There are some issues which especially need the regional level as scale for example to balance different interests or to keep in mind material and immaterial linkages (see for example Adam 1997, Peitzker 1998, Thierstein, Walser 2000a & b, Wiechmann et. al 2004, Hellriegl 2004, BMBF 2006, Johnsen 2006).

The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 contributed to such issues as follows:

2.1 Regional maintenance / material flows

To improve a circular flow economy an improved regional coordination is necessary. Using the project competitions some concrete approaches attracted public attention like value-added chains, cooperation between producers and consumers, the regional processing of agricultural products, projects on logistics, water supply, renewable primary products, 'virtual factories' and so on. Some seminars dealt with this issue for example on regional wood and energy plants. One success story is an international pilot project on 'ecologically oriented canteen kitchens and catering services' developed from a seminar.

2.2 Land use / infrastructure

Beneath the project competitions a lot of workshops has been offered on the co-operation of municipalities, regional governance, tourism und mobility, eco-management and audit scheme in urban land-use planning, citizen's participation and planning, the development of districts and so on. A task force published a brochure about good examples out of the region to improve a saving management of space. Some conflicting issues has been placed back (for example major projects located at the waterside) because such a network seems not to be the right (i.e. able to work under pressure) platform to deal with regional conflicts.

2.3 Landscape / protected areas

This issue had been of minor importance within the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 because of two reasons: On the one hand it was the political will of the Steering Committee to strengthen the economic and social issues of the sustainability concept. On the other hand this topic is the main focus of a well established institution which acts as the umbrella organisation for all ecologically oriented NGOs within the region and claims the leadership in the public notion of this issue.

2.4 Regional marketing of locations

Beneath a competition on 'sustainable projects dealing with economy and traffic' there has been a lot of seminars addressed to economic actors like seminars on support programmes, wood processing, ecological procurement, the integration of economic actors in Local Agenda 21-processes, 'Factor 4' and so on. Together with some other institutions from the region the Lake of Constance Agenda 21 also has been a collaborator of the 1st Summer Academy on Regional Management initiated by the University of St. Gall.

2.5 Regional identity

Culture and history are an important element of the region al identity. One major project within the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 has been the development of a children's book on the Lake of Constance which connects information about the region with information about sustainability (here: the use of water) wrapped in colourful paintings. The children's book has been distributed in all kindergartens and primary schools of the region. Another approach has been a seminar on the perception of landscape and also the big events (several symposia, two Youth Summits with up to 1.500 participants) strongly influenced the regional (transborder) identity.

2.6 Regional social capital

The regional social capital of a region corresponds directly with its economic performance. The creation of territorial and functional networks with workshops and seminars is the main goal of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21. The first symposium 2000 has been titled: "We Knot a Network". Some of these networks collaborated further and even developed their own projects (gender mainstreaming, integration and housing, youth participation). There has been also activities which deals directly with the social capital of the region, for example the International Youth Film Contest on "money - shopping - trademarks - credits - debts“.

2.7 Regional institutionalizing / regional management

The region is an important actor in development processes but normally it has weak institutionalized structures and less decision-making power. Therefore the main task on the regional level is to organise the cooperation of the decision-makers and relevant actors, to introduce good examples and useful instruments and to moderate the discussion about common goals and guidelines. Because of its status as a project of transborder cooperation the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 didn't act as an institution of regional management but dealt intensely with all these tasks in a more informal way.

3. A first assessment of these activities

In our case cooperation, co-ordination and networking as main tasks on the regional level is of particular importance. The region around the Lake of Constance brings together rather different political cultures (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) connected with a common language. In spite of an intense transborder cooperation since decades a lot of actors act "with their back to the Lake" and have less knowledge about successful solutions of certain problems in only 30 kilometres air-line distance (see Scherer, Walser 2005).
For this most of the seminars and workshops are structured in two parts: the presentation of good practices from all three countries and a phase of discussing and working together on the topic. Beneath concrete pilot projects and further events this structure was able to intensify networking within different fields of action.

According to Fürst (2003) networking is a precondition for successful structures of regional governance. Networks have the following attributes (Scherer 2006):

- informal relationships (not regulated by law or dependency) dominate
- the actors participate voluntarily
- the cooperation is on an equal footing (giving and receiving)
- they are applied to permanency
- they connect diverse actors from different fields and systems
- cooperative action predominates beyond hierarchical or market relationship
- trust is the fundament for cooperation

In the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 the networks are territorial as well as functional oriented, they are defined by the scope of the International Lake of Constance Conference IBK and they are oriented towards sustainable regional development in general and towards different specific topics. They are characterised by the collaboration of different political levels: from the 'Landkreise' in Germany and the Swiss cantons and German and Austrian 'Bundesländer' to the sovereign Principality of Liechtenstein. But not the top down / bottom up- difference but the sharing of the task in the sense of subsidiarity is the most important question of the cooperation.

Main question for the assessment of the effects is whether an to which extend the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 is able to govern the regional development (or more precisely: to influence the regional governance system).
As a minimum requirement for governance Fürst (2003) specifies:

- An organisational nucleus with an adequate administrative infrastructure: this is the Executive Board of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21.
- An adequate supply of resources: this is given with the subsidies from the INTERREG IIIa- programme of the European Union and the region's co-financing.
- And a well defined function of leadership within the region: such a function only exists inwards with a clear responsibility to develop new initiatives; outwards at the most can be stated an incomplete claim to represent issues of sustainable regional development.

This means that the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 can generate only a restricted ability of governance. But there are some capabilities left related to different dimensions of governance and management (see Schwaninger 1997):

Normative dimension of management (visions and values)	Strategic dimension of management (markets, customers, strategies)	Operative dimension of management (implementation, projects and processes)
• basic decision to implement the Lake of Constance Agenda 21	• establishing regional Contact Points	• lectures
• organisational structure mixed top-down and bottom-up	• annual issues	• Workshops aimed at project development
• establishing a Steering Committee	• competitions to spread good examples	• database of good practices
• basic understanding on sustainability as a concept beyond ecology	• Symposia and workshops as important activities	• Pilot projects developed within the activities
	• from indicators on sustainability to an integrated quality management	• web-based paper chase
	• target group young people	… and so on

In the end the endeavours of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 can be assessed from another point of view: what kind of 'logic of governance' works?

1. From an internal point of view a 'logic of hierarchy' plays an important role according to the prevalence of actors from politics and administration in the organisational structure. The input from the Steering Committee concerning topics and target groups, the regulations connected with the INTERREG IIIa subsidies and the integration of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 within the Internationale Bodenseekonferenz IBK predominantly works in an hierarchical way.
2. 'Daily work' mainly is dominated by a 'logic of trust' which normally works with NGOs and associations. The cooperation of the Regional Contact Points and also the cooperation between the different parts of the organisation are predominantly affected by this logic.
3. The third kind, the economic 'logic of market' controlled by supply and demand plays a minor role within the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21.

The mix of different 'logics' also shows a restricted ability of governance. The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 as regional actor depend on voluntariness and weak instruments of trust on conviction. But the input in the discussion on a new mission statement for the Lake of Constance- region and the new developed tool for the quality management for community development processes are first attempts to deal with the bargaining of conflicting interests.

4. How to assess the effects on sustainable development?

Chapter 3 described the effects of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 with respect to its capacity to influence regional governance processes in general. But what is the added value for the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in the region?
In daily politics the concept of sustainability and processes of a local (or regional) Agenda 21 is one topic beside others. And in times of economic bottlenecks it may be not the most important topic. Such processes have to deal with mayor demands of the concept of sustainable development coming along with a minor political pertinence. To assess the effects of Agenda 21- processes it is necessary to know more about the political agenda- setting and the constraints and scope for development connected with (see also Walser 2005).

But what kind of mechanisms cause the political agenda- setting? Luhmann (1971) analyses it from a systemic point of view. In politics predominantly the public opinion is responsible for the importance of a topic. ‘Attention rules’ control the rise and fall of topics and each of them has its own ‘life story’.
At first a topic remains in a latent phase where only adept and well-informed actors know about the relevancy. Some topics attract attention because of the commitment of engaged actors. If the topic reach the perception of the broad public it is able to structure the political communication. To reach this stage some unexpressed ‘attention rules’ work: maybe the topic is related to important values or to an important status of the sender. Or the topic can be related to an upcoming crisis or catastrophe, to a very new information or to other mechanisms of pain and/or curiosity. If the topic come into fashion it can influence decision making. A lot of actors jump on the bandwagon and its legitimacy is high. In this phase the topic should reach its goals or at least become permanently by institutionalisation because afterwards new topics define the political agenda. Every topic shows symptoms of fatigue after a while. Maybe it remains as a ceremonial element or even it sinks into oblivion. After this it is hardly possible to reactivate the topic in the same way. It remains again in the latent phase as described above and only the well-informed actors are working on it. As Luhmann states: “If a topic had not been able to solve its problem it must be reincarnated as a new one.”

The question arises whether the concept of sustainable development can be defined as one of these topics of political agenda-setting. Looking at the development of LA21- processes in different countries it also can be analysed such kind of life cycles.
Lafferty and Eckerberg classified in 1998 the LA21-processes within different countries into four groups based on the time of implementation and the number of Agenda processes carried out: (1) the pioneers — Sweden, UK, and the Netherlands; (2) the adapters — Denmark, Finland, and Norway; (3) the late-comers — Austria and Germany; and (4) the laggards — Spain, Italy, Ireland, and France.
Well documented are the LA21- processes in Germany where such a up-and-down can be seen: In 1996 there has been less than one hundred LA21- processes in whole Germany. In the turn of the century the LA21- topic came into fashion among the German communities: 1.400 processes in March 00, 1900 processes in March 01 and 2.300 processes in March 02. Afterwards the LA21- topic as a whole stagnated more or less. At the moment (July 06) Germany lists 2.610 LA21- processes which covers about 20 % of all municipalities (Agenda Transfer 2006).

It seems that Luhmann's theory of the public opinion can be verified also for Agenda 21-processes at first glance. To underpin this first assessment much more data are necessary but for the moment it is fair enough – the theory also correspond with everyday experiences.
Now the question arises from the perspective of the Agenda 21- processes how to influence the political agenda-setting successfully. Luhmann states that if the topic come into fashion it should reach its goals in this phase or at least become permanently by institutionalisation.
It is obvious that an Agenda 21- process can't reach its goals in a short time - it's an learning process for decades to reach the deep-rooted structural change which is necessary to implement the concept of sustainable development. For this we have to ask whether it was successful to establish the process by institutionalising its structures.

5. The success of institutionalisation

To analyse the success of institutionalisation of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 the paper refers to

- an empirical analyses of Local Agenda 21- processes in Bayern which provides the main structure (Brandt et. al. 2001),
- a research on processes of self-organisation in the Lake of Constance- region (Scherer et. al. 2001, Scherer / Walser 2003),
- an analysis of the LEADER II- Programme of the European Union (Europäische Beobachtungsstelle LEADER 1999),
- and an empirical study on the dynamics of Local Agenda 21- initiatives (UNESCO-Verbindungsstelle im Umweltbundesamt 2003).

5.1 Political integration and pertinence

Factors of success for the institutionalisation are political leadership, legitimisation of procedures and participants and the recognition as an important project for the local and regional development. The high-level Steering Committee with strategic tasks based on a resolution of the Heads of Government are most useful for the institutionalisation. Less useful are the limitation as a temporary project and sometimes a lack of public statements of the Steering Committee. Also the cooperation with decision makers on different levels and from different organisations in many cases doesn't work well.

5.2 Thematical integration

Factors of success are to link the process with other important processes of regional development and problem-solving and to keep in mind the 'triangle of sustainability' as well as establishing new cross-sectional acting tools an structures. In our case most of the activities are restricted on the creation of political awareness. All in all the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 has less influence in the problem solving of politics and administration with the exception of 'Unternehmen 21' as an upcoming tool for the quality management of local communities.

5.3 Cooperation with different actors

Factors of success are the networking of societal well accepted actors (see chapter 3 on diversity, trust, commitment…as a 'sine qua non') with common interests and shared values. Also forums, working groups and task forces are useful like the one which published the brochure on the saving management of space. All in all networking grew formidable and a lot of service concerning very different topics was offered to meet the needs of regional actors. A lot of very engaged actors has been integrated but on the other hand the integration of potent actors from other spheres (economy, public administration) was less successful.

5.4 Efficient project management

Factors of success are professional structures with adequate resources and proper competencies and an excellent and transparent communication and moderation of the whole process. This task was performed very well by the Executive Board. The qualification of the Regional Contact Points also was part of the Scientific Support. Problems arose with different priorities and criteria of success according to different cultures (national or concerning the affiliation to special groups or 'systems').

5.5 Marketing and popularisation

Factors of success are the public visibility, the handsome distribution and the recognition of success. The plenty of measures like public events and workshops, brochures, homepage, newsletter, competitions, press conferences and so on with a profound substance caused a big success. The Agenda 21- process probably is the most popular project of the International Lake of Constance Region.

5.6 Participation and civil commitment

Factors of success are a broadly based involvement of citizens and organisations supported by structures of co-operation which clearly are aimed at empowerment and transparent responsibility assignment. The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 is not a project of participation but supported such processes with a serial of workshops and events dealing with examples and instruments of participation.

5.7 (Regional) networking

Factors of success are to give an opportunity for networking, to create an adequate arena, to foster the exchange of experiences also beyond the region's borderline and to promote partnerships. Beneath the lot of activities described above some of the new institutionalised Regional Contact Points were able to create their own new networks at the subregional level. On the other hand some conflicts on spheres of influence with existing networks had to be handled.

5.8 Controlling on Sustainability

Factors of success are Criteria for sustainable development, systems of monitoring, periodical reporting and evaluation and a adaptation of goals and criteria as the case arises. The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 dealt with evaluation issues from its beginning and questions of criteria and success accompanied seven years work. The tool for quality management of local development processes is a main result of this discussion as well as criteria to evaluate the competitions, but these tools are far from being used as a standard.

5.9 Supporting framework conditions

Factors of success are sufficient resources as a precondition, a discourse on sustainability within the upper political levels and the promotion of Local Agenda 21- initiatives from top down. The Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 has the fundament of resources and also benefits from the national activities to support Locale Agenda 21- processes. But often this support has to be seen as a separate field of politics which easily can be thwarted by strategic considerations and material effects of other policies.

6. Conclusion and next steps

All in all the consideration of strengths and weaknesses shows a medium degree of institutionalisation. Following Luhmann's argumentation it is not sure whether - or better: to what extend - the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 influenced the public opinion successfully enough to become a permanent structure.
The litmus test will be the continuing after phasing-out the INTERREG IIIa- subsidies. At the moment most of the members of the International Lake of Constance region promised further financial support at least for one year. In times of economic bottlenecks this can be appreciated as success. Advanced concepts on the integration of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 within the other working structures and processes o the transborder cooperation are in the middle of discussion.

For this the first rough assessment of the results of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 from an internal point of view will be supplemented by an external evaluation. The evaluation includes three steps:

1. A compilation of concrete impulses and functional chains coming from single events, workshops, competitions… with desk research and interviews.
2. An electronic inquiry of all 'customers' of the Lake of Constance- Agenda 21 concerning impressions, publicity and profile.
3. And a questioning of all mayors of towns and villages within the region about preferences and experiences.

The results of the evaluation also should be available at the Easy Eco Conference 2006 in Saarbrücken.

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