Methodologies for Generalising from the Unique: Knowledge Transfer in Territorial Governance Investigations and Evaluations.

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Abstract: Investigations and evaluations of territorial practices and programmes are case-based. But investigations conducted in case-based spatial settings generate knowledge that often has only very specific applicability. Practice-oriented investigations and evaluations aspire to derive policy and/or action lessons beyond the boundaries of the case with which it is concerned. They strive for generalisability, in order to make it possible for lessons to be transferred to different settings. Mechanisms are therefore needed to mediate between different loci and levels of applicability for the results of investigations and evaluations. The mediation between the local knowledge and transferable knowledge in territorial programmes can be managed as a communicative and interactive process. This involves creating network contexts in which key actors have a transaction forum in which transferable knowledge can be generated in a dialogical procedures. This paper gives two examples illustrating investigation/evaluation strategies appropriate for programmes in case-based spatial settings: 1) a national 'EXWOST' programme of the German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning on 'Potentials of Housing Cooperatives' in which the author was a member of the evaluation team, responsible for inter-project transfer and synthesis evaluation and 2) a transnational project entitled 'ENTRUST' on neighbourhood regeneration in the Framework RTD Program in which the author was a member of the coordination team with responsibility for promoting transnational learning.

INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATION AND EVALUATION IN CASE-BASED SETTINGS

Territorial governance – per definitionem – always takes place in specific spatial settings. Investigations and evaluations of territorial practices and programmes are correspondingly case-based. However, investigations conducted in case-based spatial settings generate knowledge that often has only very specific applicability with little potential for generalization. This is the dilemma of the unique case.

Practice-oriented investigations and evaluations aspire to derive policy and/or action lessons beyond the boundaries of the case with which it is concerned. They strive for generalisability, in order to make it possible for lessons to be transferred to different settings. Mechanisms are therefore needed to mediate between different loci and levels of applicability for the results of investigations and evaluations.

How can this done? It is often attempted to enhance generalisability through the aggregation of data from different settings. Territorial projects – case-based, neighbourhood-based – supply data to a central data bank which generates a data set which transcends the specificities of locality. Aggregation, though, presupposes definitional stability in the categories used in different territorial settings – something which cannot be guaranteed, since the same term can mean different things in different territories or cultures. Furthermore, it can only function with standardized categories – and therefore is reductionist and cannot capture uniqueness and complexity. The monitoring and evaluation of EU programmes often takes this reductionist, aggregating form. This leads to disquiet and dissatisfaction amongst researchers and practitioners working in cased-based local territorial contexts, who fear that the key characteristics of their experience will not be captured by such investigative methods.

How can one generate territorially and transnationally transferable lessons for urban policy from the evidence of single cases in unique settings embedded in local policy and planning cultures? There are alternative strategies, avoiding the reductionism of quantitative aggregation: the mediation between the local knowledge and transferable knowledge in territorial programmes needs to be a communicative and interactive process, which takes place through negotiation between specific and general interests. This involves creating network contexts in which key actors have a transaction forum in which transferable knowledge can be generated in a dialogical procedure.

In the following, I give two examples illustrating investigation/evaluation strategies appropriate for programmes in case-based spatial settings:

1) a national 'EXWOST' programme of the German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning on 'Potentials of Housing Cooperatives' in which the author was a member of the evaluation team, responsible for inter-project transfer and synthesis evaluation. This project involved the development and implementation of an *evaluation methodology* for application in network architectures, which have flat power relations, in which practice innovation is intended to drive policy innovation, and are aimed towards learning and knowledge transfer.

2) a transnational project entitled 'ENTRUST' on neighbourhood regeneration in the Framework RTD Program in which the author was a member of the coordination team with responsibility for promoting transnational transfer. This project involved the development and implementation of a *transnational learning methodology* for knowledge generation and transfer in transnational research/practice partnerships aiming at informing change at governance, organisational and professional levels.

EXWOST: A NATIONAL NETWORK OF MODEL PROJECTS ON COOPERATIVE HOUSING

The programme 'Potentials of Housing Cooperatives' (Genossenschaftspotenziale) within the Federal German Experimental Housing and Urban Design programme (Experimenteller Wohnungs- und Städtebau – EXWOST) was a two year programme 2004-2006 promoting and testing innovative approaches in cooperative housing provision. The methodological approach we applied as programme evaluators is a form of 'cluster evaluation' (Worthen / Schmitz 1997, Potter P 2004b, Potter 2005), a methodology for knowledge management, policy development and practice transfer in heterogeneous programs, generating transferable knowledge from unique cases.

In the EXWOST programs, the Federal Transport Ministry has funded since the end of the 1980s some 400 individual projects within some 30 thematic research programs. A wealth of experience has been collected over time regarding methodological and organizational issues connected to the evaluation of programmes of experimental projects. Each programme consists ideally of ten to twenty projects and runs for two/three years. Some EXWOST programmes have covered technical issues in urban planning and architecture: urban conservation, urban ecology, cost reduced housing construction. Others have tackled interdisciplinary issues: elderly-friendly neighbourhoods, housing for lone parent families, mixed use in urban design, neighbourhood renewal (on the history, see Wollmann 1990; Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau- und Wohnungswesen 2000).

Our programme on housing cooperatives aimed to promote cooperation and information exchange among various actors in policy, research and practice. It was a multi-level evaluation in the sense that each local project has its own evaluation/technical assistance capability, which collaborated with the central evaluation team (in which I was a member) at the network level (Maron / Potter / Simbriger 2007).

PROGRAMME ACHITECTURE: LOCAL PRACTICE, CENTRAL EVALUATION

Our network comprised 21 local case studies of local innovations in cooperative housing provision. These projects are oriented towards urban planning practice, they are intended to have a pilot function, addressing current problems and providing innovative solutions. The cases are sponsored as model projects with Federal funding in the form of local case studies, each of which had their own project evaluator.

The *local evaluators* had complex roles: technical assistance, development, implementation, documentation, and evaluation. The local projects functioned relatively

autonomously provided that they participated in the process, carried out the contractually agreed tasks (which were framed in quite broad terms to allow flexibility), addressed the research questions and delivered their reports. Given that the local teams were generally not researchers but urban planning professionals, we offered the local evaluators at the beginning of the programme a special seminar on methodological issues in evaluation, which was an innovation, not having been attempted in other EXWOST programmes (Potter 2005b).

Our role in the *central evaluation team* was also complex: initially, we had a programme planning role, which then became a monitoring role during the course of the program. We undertook visits to the projects, organized internal workshops at different locations (as guests of one of the projects throughout the country). We received the interim reports of the projects and prepared interim synthesis reports. Finally, at the end of the two-year programme we in the central team made a synthesis of the results of the local projects and organized a final conference for presentation of the results to audiences of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers, with theme-based workshops within which local projects reported on their work.

The funding allocations favour the pilot project level rather than the overall programme level, which militates against unitary research design. But at the same time, this decentralized emphasis opens up the programmes for a diversity of different approaches at the project level. Facilitating the internal learning and external transfer from a group of relatively heterogeneous projects addressing the same overall research questions is the task of the central evaluation team. This team has the following tasks:

- setting up the model project programmes, defining themes and research questions,
- inviting proposals for model projects and choosing the candidates,
- negotiating the specific funded activities (terms of contract),
- monitoring activities,
- promoting inter-project learning through regular internal workshops,
- disseminating interim results in expert seminars and serial publications,
- synthesizing the transferable lessons from project results and finally,
- organizing a final conference and writing a final report.

That is to say, the central evaluation teams have programme planning, technical assistance, programme monitoring roles as well as programme synthesis and documentation roles. These are complex roles corresponding in German to the term 'wissenschaftliche Begleitung', which refers often to a combination of monitoring, documentation, technical assistance, and evaluation roles.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The social science and evaluation methodology of the EXWOST has not been the subject of focused methodological discussion during its course since the late 1980s.

With regard to social science methodology: The theoretical and methodological literature (cf. Hellstern / Wollmann 1978) associated with EXWOST at the time of its inception privileged positivist and post-positivist social research paradigms - quasi-experimental methods, hypothesis testing in controlled settings. The title of the programme "EXWOST – Experimental Housing and Urban Design" indicates the kind of paradigm underlying the thinking of the programme initiators. The label 'experiment' recurs in the texts presenting the programme (Fuhrich / Gatzweiler 1990, 523). The pay-off from EXWOST, though, is not gained through 'experiment' in the strict sense, for the conventional notion of 'experiment' is rarely appropriate in the research areas of EXWOST – or, indeed, in other human service situations. The experimental method is strictly speaking characterized by a hypothesis which is posed initially, and where in a stable and replicable situation a limited number of relevant variables are controlled and manipulated, results are obtained which are then recorded and communicated. The experimenter is a researcher whose job is then done, the results are handed over to a policy-maker who decides on the basis of recommendations and then to a practitioner who applies the knowledge generated in the settings of his or her work.

With regard to evaluation methodology: The official rationale has been traditional impact assessment (cf Rossi / Freeman 1993): delivering answers to pre-set questions set by the funding agency. The Federal guidelines have not been formally challenged:

> *(Die) Reichweite und Grenzen (von EXWOST) ergeben sich aus der Aufgabenstellung von Ressortforschung, die "darauf gerichtet ist, Entscheidungshilfen zur sachgemäßen Erfüllung der Fachaufgaben" des BMBau zu gewinnen, und damit aus der "Orientierung des Programms ausschließlich auf den politischen Erkenntnisbedarf des Bundes"* (Wollmann 1990, 565)

This proposition is in tune with linear models of learning, decision-making and management (collect information, test hypotheses, apply into general practice of the basis of tested procedures). That is, an instrumental view of evaluation with the ministry posing the questions and paying projects to answer the questions, with a vertical flow of knowledge, upwards to the Federal ministry. But if that were the case, there would be no particular rationale for sponsoring horizontal, inter-project communication.

This posited distinction between those asking and those answering questions was in practice untenable and did not correspond to what actually happened. This tension was particularly evident in the transnational studies commissioned within the programmes (see, for example, Brech / Potter 1991, Potter / Zill 1994, Potter 1996). The formal model of the transnational studies was one of *one-way information flows*, meeting the knowledge needs of the Federal Government. In practice, in the implementation of the projects we strove to achieve a paradigm of *reciprocity*, affirming that all participants are in a learning situation and that all have a wish for receiving as well as delivering information - returning favours, giving and receiving. That is, we did not espouse the principles of technical rationality – with its strict divisions of responsibilities, institutional separation of practice from evaluation, separation of knowing from doing, evaluators applying a different set of procedures which are 'outside' the practice sphere of the practitioners.

The conventional notion of scientific learning and of the dichotomy between research and practice does not correspond to the reality of people's behaviour in these working contexts of EXWOST. Nor is an evaluation model based on technical rationality (focus on summative evaluation, impact assessment, leading to recommendations reported to the commissioning client, etc.) appropriate to describe the kind of learning processes generated in the EXWOST evaluation approach. In practice over the years the programme participants have (intuitively) generally made use of naturalistic paradigms - heuristic, inductive approaches in field settings. This disjunction between methodological discourse ('espoused theories') and empirical practice ('theories in use') has remained largely unarticulated (on this disjunction, see the seminal work by Schön 1983).

EVALUATION FOR LEARNING

Our style of cluster evaluation placed a strong emphasis on learning through inter-project networking and through regular and timely dissemination of interim results. Case-based interim results and communicative, interactive learning situations have been the strengths of the program, benefiting the practitioner and decision-making community probably more than synthesized results produced at the end of the program.

What we see here is the adoption of a learning paradigm of 'communicative action' (Forester 1989, Forester 1999) in the cluster evaluation of unique case studies: processes of learning (drawing on organizational theory), which are no longer seen as linear and uni-directional transfers of knowledge from evaluators to funders (and secondarily to practitioners), and no longer having clear divisions of labour and discrete role allocation - positions associated with the work of Argyris and Schön (cf. Argyris 1990; Argyris 1999; Argyris / Schön 1996).

Moreover, the emphasis on communication between actors, implicitly, though not explicitly, calls into question conventional paradigms of the profession of planning, still closely linked to traditional models of physical planning, with its focus on the construction of the built environment, rather our conception of living environments as complexes of services to be delivered. In other words, instead of physical 'planning' as a practice of construction of a built environment, we think more of participatory planning as bringing networks of lay and professional experts together in negotiated learning about society and space (cf. Forester 1989, Forester 1999, Selle 1996, Innes 1995, Healey 1992).

Our intention was to establish favourable conditions for learning, and it is in this softer sense that we wanted the programme to have impact. Learning is achieved through the mechanisms of targeting funding towards innovative practice, continuing programmes over several years, involving a large number of key actors, involving different levels of government, intensive networking of key specialists, employing various channels for information (internal and external), securing timely production of interim results, dissemination of provisional information, which is confirmed or reviewed over time. These elements serve towards maximizing the indirect learning benefits from evaluations, in line with the principle that evaluations infrequently have an unmediated impact on the specific policies or programmes which they investigate, but instead have a more diffuse and indirect learning effect (cf. Weiss 1990).

While the field of professional practice of EXWOST has been urban planning, the model of theme-related networks of experimental projects characteristic of EXWOST is relevant for many multi-level human service programmes with practice-oriented interventions in area-based settings. In such complex and innovative networks, the generation and management of knowledge at different organizational levels (local, programme, transnational), and the articulation of transfer between these levels, is of central importance, and is a central *evaluative* activity.

ENTRUST: A TRANSNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN NEIGHBOURHOOD REGENERATION

The second example presented in this paper is the ENTRUST thematic network in the Fifth Framework RTD Program, Key Action 4; 'City of Tomorrow and Cultural Heritage' within the Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development thematic programme. This was a network of researchers and practitioners, universities and city authorities in eight locations (Berlin, Copenhagen, Dublin, Glasgow, Hamburg, Lisbon, Valetta and Vilnius) and had the objective of involving partnerships in the betterment of deprived neighbourhoods whilst producing and making use of the transnational knowledge base (Corcoran et al. 2004).

In the last section I attempted to show how evaluation methodology can be a suitable *organizational frame* for the management of learning processes in urban research and practice networks. In this second section I wish to consider the *methodological principles* which are appropriate in such networks, and in this case in particular in multi-site European thematic partnerships, outlining the requirements for utilizable qualitative and ethnographic instruments in such research/practice contexts. I am concerned here with the application of evaluation approaches for knowledge generation and management in transnational investigations of urban regeneration policies.

In this ENTRUST project I was brought in as a consultant to the coordination team to strengthen the base for transnational learning in the central team – half way through the project – and found my task to be one of making sense of the activities undertaken and identifying the pay-offs of transnational exchange for the partners. This was an evaluative agenda, though not conducted in a traditionally evaluative manner (no interviews, no benchmarks) and did not result in a classical evaluator´s report but in a theoretical paper setting out post-hoc the methodology employed. My objective in this project was to find ways of meeting the requirements of the two facets of transferability (across actors and across settings) when managing heterogeneous evidence and heterogeneous addressees. That is: techniques for transferring knowledge to audiences at different levels of territorial governance.

The methodology was developed in an inductive way during the course of the project. ENTRUST, as a network of practitioners and researchers engaged in urban regeneration in eight European cities, laid a strong emphasis on presence and reciprocity in transnational communication. The methodology had to facilitate this. The ENTRUST work process was a methodology developed in an emergent rather than pre-ordinate manner, seeking to

compose the appropriate investigation design during the course of the project through exploration instead of pre-programming.

THE WORK PROCESS

The network process involved the following steps, which were not pre-programmed but emerged through the process itself:

1) Field visits and reports. The work of the network began with an intensive series of cross-visits, with members of each of the participating cities meeting in all eight cities for a case study visit in the period to November 2002. Without defining the research questions in advance, each city team documented their perceptions of and insights into the case study neighborhoods. These cross-visit reports generated some 50 brief texts.
2) Defining and agreeing on research issues. During the final city cross-visit (Valletta, November 2002); the network members worked in cross-city groups to derive common research issues from the cross-visits, and to decide on priorities among the research issues.
3) Identifying interests for bilateral learning. At the subsequent meeting (Lisbon, January 2003) we returned to the subjective interests of the city teams, supplementing decontextualised issues with situated knowledge interests. This was intended as a way of operationalising what network members had earlier proposed as a "twinning" work process, in which bilateral exchanges were to be strengthened.
4) Writing one´s own case study. From the beginning, there had been a consensus that a major element of the empirical evidence for the ENTRUST project would be the case studies of neighbourhood renewal in each of the participating cities. These texts had been begun at different times in different cities, but we had not decided on form the text should take until a joint meeting in January 2003. It was agreed that the case study was to be written as a narrative, without a prescribed format.
5) Reviewing others´ case studies. At the next meeting in Dublin (April 2003) the case studies were presented not by the authors of the texts but by reviewers from other ENTRUST cities. This review process reinforced a bilateral dialogue and stressed to participants the creative potential of subjective interpretation.
6) Agreeing on thematic focuses. At the same meeting, the group discussed, developed and agreed four cross cutting themes (aims of regeneration, involving the private sector, community participation, mainstreaming and anchoring). Four editorial teams (two people in each, with all cities represented), backed up by cross-city teams, were set up to draft a paper on each of the themes.
7) Writing thematic analyses. This process had two stages. First of all, the editors of the thematic papers collated data and analytical interpretations from the experience of each city. From the material collected the editors derived the key messages, supported by empirical evidence. The first drafts of these thematic papers were presented and discussed in Brussels in July 2003, and presented in final form in Berlin in September 2003.

8) Assembling recommendations and guidelines. In Glasgow in December 2003, the members of the cross-city teams met to sort through the recommendations contained in the thematic papers, to select those concerned with policy and those concerned with practice, and to determine priorities in the messages chosen. The results of the process were reworked by editors into final texts.

9) Communicating final products. The summary report, policy recommendations and practitioner guidelines were drafted by the responsible editors; presented in draft form at the final network meeting in Vilnius in April 2004; and, following incorporation of feedback, completed for publication and presentation at the final public conference in Hamburg in June 2004.

ITERATIVE PRACTICE AND LINEAR DOCUMENTATION

During ENTRUST´s two and a half years, the process was un-programmed, meandering, even 'messy'. This was a consequence of the methodological approach: qualitative investigation instruments have to mould themselves to their objects; communicative methods may only be semi-structured if they are to promote creative interaction; iterative principles involve – by definition – returning to examine the same object or issue again, but with wiser eyes; and finally, taking participatory values seriously means decisions will be reconsidered and changes made to a project "design" in mid-course. Nonetheless, the principal documentary products generated by the ENTRUST work process exhibit a surprising and ironic linearity which give the appearance of clear and direct route:

- Stage one: 56 cross-visit reports. on-site analyses of the practices in the neighbourhoods of the partners.
- Stage two: 8 case studies. empirical evidence of the partners' cases in each of the eight participating cities.
- Stage three: 4 thematic analyses. key themes as thematic evidence on a comparative basis.
- Stage four: 2 recommendations/guidelines. recommendations for policy-makers and guidelines for practitioners in urban regeneration.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INVESTIGATION METHODOLOGIES

What does this disjunction between an untidy, iterative activities process and the structured, linear documentary product signify? That the promotion of learning is facilitated by an emergent structure, not by pre-programming. We derived from our practice an understanding of the key investigative paradigms for promoting transnational learning in partnerships composed of among diverse people from heterogeneous projects, but with a common agenda:

1) Qualitative: A qualitative investigation methodology is appropriate which takes into account the nature of the empirical interventions, which are subjective and cannot be understood independently of the perspective and interest of the actors, context-bounded and cannot be abstracted from locational relevance, and are finally narrative practices

which cannot be reduced to taxonomies. This draws particularly on methodological debates within ethnography (cf Denzin / Lincoln 2005).

2) Communicative: Data collection and knowledge generation is a process of communication and reciprocity, and therefore the management and facilitation of group interaction and appropriate forms of recording and processing verbal information are of key importance. This means that the methodology is dialogical, negating the traditional role division of investigator and object and, instead, stressing mutual investigation and exploration. Here one can draw particularly on sources in planning theory (cf Healey 1992, 1997).
3) Iterative: This approach stresses the importance of iterative processes in the generation of knowledge. The route from particular, context-bounded learning to the transferable message is not a single, unidirectional step, but rather a process which involves an interplay between the unique and the general, enhanced in a recurrent procedure involving different actors and different techniques. Here group facilitation techniques of organizational development are instructive (Beywl / Potter 1998, Preskill / Torres 1999).
4) Participative: Furthermore, this methodology has to recognize that a project´s organizational form (a network of peers) cannot make use of hierarchical direction, but must secure acceptance and motivation. Participation becomes not an add-on but an integral component of the project architecture in a partnership. Here we can gain understanding from social network theory (Kickert et al 1997, Geddes / Benington 2001, Berry et al 2004).
5) Open-ended: Acceptance and motivation can be best achieved by employing a heuristic-inductive approach by which key evaluative issues are developed jointly and 'owned' by the participants instead of being laid down pre-ordinately in a hypothetical-deductive approach. The principle of participation requires an open-ended, emergent process, to go back to the terminology of Stake, whose approach of "responsive evaluation" is specifically instructive here (Greene / Abma 2001, Abma 2006).
6) Structured: Nonetheless, this is not to negate the possibility or desirability of an evaluation 'design', for there needs to be an agreement on the parameters of a project in advance, there needs to be a mission and a work program, in such a way as to secure internal consensus among partners and – last but not least – to make a convincing submission to a funding agency with a proposal having a clear content, procedure and product, and to give guidelines for its evaluability. This means understanding project design and contractual procedures as a 'scaffolding' (drawing on the educational psychology of Wygotski) within which to build the project (cf Rogers / Williams 2006).

CONCLUSION: INVESTIGATION, EVALUATION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

The two examples set out in this paper of empirical practice in linking investigation, evaluation and knowledge transfer have benefited from theoretical and methodological

developments not only in the field of programme evaluation, but also of organisational learning and planning theory. Moreover, they draw on practical experience in a number of territorial governance programmes, which have had the goal of generating transferable knowledge from thematic programmes of heterogeneous innovative projects with diverse objectives and interests, in the planning and implementation of territorial interventions in the European Union.

These methodological approaches are appropriate for tasks of investigation, evaluation and knowledge management in practice contexts. Indeed, in such contexts the distinction between practice, investigation, evaluation and transfer activities becomes blurred. These become overlapping activities with reflecting on practice being a learning activity. Not just these practices of participants overlap and merge, but their roles do likewise. The evaluator may also be coordinator, a consultant for transnational learning, or a researcher. The evaluator role intersects with roles of project coordination, knowledge management, capacity building, organizational development or even motivation and leadership. While this is seen by some as an ambiguity compromising professional identity, this complexity can also create creative opportunities for learning: achieving new knowledge and new skills in transnational networks of territorial governance.

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