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“A Self-critical Analysis of a Running Research Project⁶¹ to Improve the Sustainability of Public Place Management”

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Abstract: The paper presents the way a framework for (self-)assessment to improve the sustainability of practices in public places and spaces was created during the first months of the Topozym action research. It underlines obstacles encountered and solutions found by a multidisciplinary team in creating this tool. Based on this critical self-analysis, the difficulties of putting the theoretical ideas on action research in practice are discussed.

⁶¹ The Topozym project (<http://www.topozym.be>) is funded by the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service – Science Policy, as part of the program ‘Sciences for Sustainable Development’.

Definitions of action research vary widely, depending on the researchers, their backgrounds, experiences and academic environment. Several useful books discuss the theory and the methodology of action research, but analyses of real applications show the great diversity of approaches and philosophies (Resweber, 1995, Barbier, 1996, Liu, 1997, Reason & Bradbury, 2001, Christen-Gueissaz et al, 2006, Amiotte-Suchet, 2007). When researchers join a network for a research project, these differences in definition, philosophy and habits challenge the co-construction of the action research.

The questions of what an action research must be and how it can be learned remain open. Important issues are still discussed. What is the role of the researcher in action research? Can someone be an expert in action research? Can action research occur without a “professional” researcher? Expertise seems a strange idea in action research, as it is postulated that each participant is an expert and contributes to the co-construction of the research. Due to the specific characteristics of action research – it deals with the present (Chandler, Torbert, 2003), deals with complexity, it is directly validated by actions, and it focuses on transformation (especially the transformation of the partners) – action research is usually successful from the action point of view (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). On the other side, difficulties regarding the establishment of the role of the researcher exist: he often becomes a facilitator using scientific tools; he often has difficulties to theorize his work; and he is often not recognized by other scientists as a real researcher.

The rare literature that does exist on the role of the researcher in action research encourages him to have a self-reflective stance along the research process and to search for invariants between the different action researches that he has experimented. In this light, this paper reports the first nine months of an action-training-research, focusing on the elaboration of a tool by the research team. This tool is designed to increase the awareness of actors to different aspects of sustainable development. In this paper, we present a self-reflection on choices we have made during these first months, in order to underline the difficulties encountered and the solutions found by the Topozym team. Although each action research has to create its own way (Christen-Gueissaz, 2006), we hope that our experiences in the framework of the Topozym project can help other actors and researchers to avoid some of our pitfalls.

1. THE CONTEXT: TOPOZYM

The Topozym project (www.topozym.be) is an action-training-research aiming to help evolve concepts and practices in the management and use of public places and spaces, with a focus on sustainable development (Schmitz et al., 2006). The final research objective is to produce a “dashboard” for use by people who can change the behaviour of stakeholders, to help them design and/or evaluate efficient and coherent participative approaches for territorial governance of public places and spaces. This “dashboard” must be understood as a toolbox including concepts, indicators, syntheses of experiences and training systems.

The emphasis placed on behavioural changes is a response to today’s urgent need to define new ways of helping people to become aware of our responsibilities at the local and global level. This should eventually lead to ways of managing and using public places and spaces in a more careful manner, one which is more respectful and shows more concern for the

future. The project seeks to demonstrate the applicability of certain aspects of sustainability that are not always taken into account. It tries to do so by defining the concept of sustainable development and the interrelation of its various aspects in the case of some stakeholders through a training programme.

The Topozym research has a three phases approach, with each phase helping to contribute to the final “dashboard”: (1) the elaboration of an inventory and typology of tools and approaches, (2) an in depth analysis of six projects (“case studies”), and (3) a training for the actors of each of the “case studies”. The project has started in January 2007 and will finish in December 2008. Three Institutions – the University of Liège, the Catholic University of Leuven and the Institute of Eco-Pedagogy – are partners in this research project. About seven researchers and five trainers and about fifty actors of the six “case studies” are involved in the project. The research is funded by the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service – Science Policy, as part of the program ‘Sciences for Sustainable Development’. The first “case studies” in which the Topozym team intervenes are a large park in the north of Antwerp, a bike and pedestrian path in Charleroi, and the temporary Christmas Village in Liège. Three other projects of public place management will be selected in the next months.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

One important part of the work that has been done so far is the development of an analytical framework for projects of public place management. This tool is made up of criteria that enable the assessment of the sustainability of the projects and the tools used in these projects. The framework is embodied in a grid that is divided in six main principles and for which about forty directing questions are proposed. This grid results from passionate and rich discussions between six Topozym researchers, originated from different academic disciplines: an anthropologist, an engineer, an economist, a linguist and two geographers.⁶² The two main goals, defined at the beginning of these workshops, were (a) to stimulate a discussion within the research team on sustainable development and (b) to design a framework to analyse the sustainability of the six “case studies”.

Different problems made these workshops difficult, but all the more interesting. It was not easy to find existing tools, concepts and definitions that were acceptable for all researchers and for the Topozym project⁶³, nor to adapt certain concepts to small local projects (see also Ballard, 2005), nor to conciliate the differences in points of view between the disciplines around the table. For instance: How many and which pillars must be taken into account in a sustainable development analysis? Is the cultural pillar a fourth pillar or is the cultural approach part of the social pillar? How to reduce the risk of breaking up the necessary complementarities of the approaches with the presentation in different pillars? How to include “good governance”? How to define solidarity and shouldn’t we rather use

⁶² De Graef Sarai (KUL), Philippot Marc (IEP), Lejeune Wafa (Ulg), Dumont Elisabeth (Ulg), Dalimier Isabelle (Ulg), Schmitz Serge (Ulg).

⁶³ The Brundtland report, the Agenda 21-criteria, or the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment were however helpful basic frameworks.

the rarer concept of equity? The workshops proved useful to underline the different points of view on and levels of sustainable development, which was the first goal of these workshops. They also showed that it is necessary to begin with the actors' needs and will when wanting to increase the sustainability of their actions.

At the end of these discussions, the researchers agreed upon the six main principles that organize the framework and they proposed a first serial of directing questions. They decided to formulate open questions instead of indicators, wanting to avoid a too normative approach and the increasing trend by many managers of meeting indicators instead of target aims (Bernard, 2005). The general approach is to avoid a scoreboard giving good or bad notes, but to offer bases for reflection on the sustainability of a certain project. The questions aim at positioning the projects and the actions with regard to diverse criteria of sustainability and to show potential alternative ways of acting.

- The self-assessment grid exists today in French and in Dutch. The six following principles were selected by the research team:
- transversality (or the mutual reinforcement of the different pillars of sustainable development),
- participation of stakeholders, users and citizens to the different phases of the project,
- pro-activity both in the sense of precaution and sustained improvement,
- aptitude with regard to the local context and its integration to regional and global scales,
- solidarity, including an explicit and equitable sharing of responsibility,
- conscientiousness raising of the stakeholders, users and citizens.

3. FROM AN ASSESSMENT TO SELF-ASSESSMENT GRID AND BACK

While formulating the directing questions for each of these six principles, the researchers decided to adapt the assessment framework so that it could be used directly by actors of projects of public place management. This adaptation should increase the social value of this tool and of the Topozym research in general, and fit with the guidelines of the territorial intelligence network (www.territorial-intelligence.eu).

To suit these objectives certain changes had to be made to the original version of the questionnaire. The vocabulary had to be as simple, but also as exact, as possible. The number of questions had to be reduced, so that answering the questionnaire would not take too much time. A guide for users seemed necessary to clarify some concepts or to give some examples of alternative ways of acting and thinking. Wanting to avoid model answers that could force a certain view on sustainable development onto the actors or give too much information about what they considered being "good practices", the researchers spent a lot of time formulating and reformulating the questions. Moreover, the questions had to induce a self-reflection about the project and personal practices with regard to sustainable development. The grid was thus becoming a training tool.

First discussions with actors – not linked to the six “case studies” – on the basis of the self-assessment grid showed the usefulness of the tool. The grid could not only serve as an instrument to communicate our understanding of sustainability, but also as one that can help actors of public place management to explore different aspects of sustainable development. Nevertheless, up until now the grid has not been tested in a real project.

We have decided not to give the grid to the actors of our six “case studies” as a tool for self-assessment. Because the first phase of the Topozym training activities will consist out of the construction of a common concept of sustainable development within the group of actors of the “case studies”, the Topozym partner leading this training phase has insisted on avoiding any kind of influence of the researchers on these actors during the in depth analysis of the “case studies”. The self-assessment grid thus again became a tool for assessment for the researchers and no longer a tool for self-assessment. It will serve the researchers while evaluating the sustainability of the “case studies”. It could also be used during the training activities, among other existing tools, to be deconstructed and reconstructed and eventually to help improve and change behaviours of actors.

4. LIMITS OF THE TOPOZYM ACTION-TRAINING-RESEARCH

This evolution – defined by certain researchers of the team as “the reject of the grid” – illustrates the difficulties to combine different scientific cultures and ideas on (action) research of partners in a network for a research project. This is especially the case when action research would lead, via the cross-boarding of disciplinary expertise, to a co-construction by the different partners of a new community of practices (Wenger, 1998). During the first nine months of the Topozym project, the researcher with a heavy positivist background tried to impose a more directed inquiry that could be reproducible in the different “case studies”. The trainers wanted to avoid as much as possible any influence of the researchers on the actors before the training phase started.

Another example of this kind of difficulties can be seen in the changes in the research methodology of the in depth analysis of the six “case studies”. The original methodology foresaw a serial of focus groups, animated by the researchers, to grasp the dynamic of the project and the interrelations between the actors. Based on an analogous argumentation than that of the evolution of the grid, the trainers did not want the group of actors to interact before the actual beginning of the training phase. The team thus decided to replace the focus groups by an augmentation of the number of individual interviews.

In addition to these difficulties, the Topozym team soon understood that the late integration of the actors of the “case studies” in the research project – namely after the Topozym project was submitted to be funded – may cause great distortions with regard to the research agenda. A deeper and earlier collaboration between the different actors of the research (the researchers, the trainers and the actors) would have probably improved the quality of the action research. As a partial solution for this problem, the team decided to organize a synchronisation meeting, as early as possible in the process, for each “case study”. This synchronisation meeting between actors, researchers and trainers, is designed to (a) give equitable information to all partners and (b) discuss the agenda of the action research.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the development of a tool for (self-)assessment, that could improve the sustainability of public place management. Because of the laborious nature of this task, to not use it for the purpose and in the way it was conceived was no easy decision and has been the object of disagreement between members of the Topozym team. However, the discussions leading to this grid and the common definition of six main principles of sustainability have already proven very useful. When presenting the grid to actors that are not linked to the “case studies”, reactions were positive and the grid seems to be able to open minds to different components of sustainability.

The Topozym research is still running and we do not have the necessary detachment yet to evaluate the different choices made and their impact on the action-training-research. Nevertheless, the past nine months underlined many difficulties to conciliate an action research approach with more traditional research approaches. The integration of a training phase, based on a socio-constructivism paradigm, in particular, has led – because of its phasing at the end of the research – to high constraints for the researchers during the in depth analyses of the “case studies”.

The question on the role of the researcher in action research, and more particularly when the research is enriched by the participation of “professional trainers”, does not have an obvious answer. Keeping the researcher confined to its role of disciplinary expert – the way traditional research approaches would want him to – induces the risks of too much distance from the real need of the actors, of too much simplifying the complexity of the project, and eventually of merely being a tool instead of an actor in the action research.

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