

Mainstreaming Partnerships for Sustainable Regional Development

All Talk and No Impact?

Kooperationen für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung gelten oft als inhärent gut. Allerdings sind sie nicht immer effektiv, wie viele Agenda-Prozesse zeigen. Für erfolgreiche Kooperationen müssen eine Reihe von Faktoren beachtet werden, zum Beispiel Zweck, mögliche Mitglieder, Strukturen und Ablaufprozesse sowie der institutionelle Rahmen. Besonders hervorzuheben ist eine realistische Einschätzung, inwieweit die Mainstream-Politik beeinflusst werden kann. Dies wird anhand von Beispielen aus Pilotprojekten der Europäischen Strukturfonds illustriert.

Von Timothy Moss

It is widely held that partnership is an essential instrument for promoting sustainable development. For some commentators, indeed, development cannot be sustainable without a strong partnership of local or regional stakeholders. There are many important arguments to substantiate this position, pointing for instance to the need for greater cross-sectoral, trans-societal and multi-level cooperation in order to address the complex challenges of sustainability. Recent experience indicates, however, that partnerships created to promote sustainable urban or regional development are often less effective than originally anticipated. Many Local Agenda 21 partnerships, painstakingly constructed to reflect a broad selection of stakeholders, have proven unable to influence significantly mainstream local development policy, operating in parallel and at a distance to decision-making processes. This suggests we need to take a closer, more critical look at partnerships for sustainability with a view to establishing their functional value in achieving different objectives. For the purpose of this contribution we will base our observations on a field of regional development – EU Structural Funding – where the danger of sustainability partnerships being sidelined out of the picture would appear to be great, given the strong emphasis of Structural Funds programmes in the past on economic development.

► Justifying Partnerships for Sustainable Regional Development

Sustainable development poses challenges to conventional ways of solving development problems on several fronts. In the first instance it involves recognising the interrelationships between diffe-

rent policy fields – such as economic, social and environmental – and between different spatial levels of action. From this arises the need to improve co-ordination between policy objectives and instruments in order to achieve an optimal balance of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental quality. This, in turn, often requires changes to institutionalised structures and procedures for policy delivery. New ways of policy-making are needed which are capable of taking account of the complexity of interests and cross-sectoral dimensions to sustainable development. Government bodies cannot meet the challenge alone – the involvement of a wide range of agencies and social groups is crucial.

A recent study by the Tavistock Institute on the partnership principle in Structural Funds regulation concludes that „partnership, although a relatively recent innovation, has already become deeply embedded in all stages of Structural Funds programming“ (1). Contrary to widespread fears of the operational inefficiencies of participatory approaches, partnership was shown in almost all the cases reviewed by the Tavistock study to have actually improved programme efficiency, particularly relating to programme preparation and project selection. In about half the cases it is credited with having improved communication, local knowledge and future decision-making capacity. In general, according to the case studies' experience, the difficulties arising from the exclusion of key partners are greater than those associated with a more inclusive partnership strategy. It would appear, therefore, that procedures for managing Structural Funds, as well as for promoting sustainable development, benefit from the existence of strong, inclusive partnerships.

► Limitations to Partnerships

The process of building a more participatory style of development policy is, however, not easy. Public bodies accustomed to making all the decisions may find it hard to engage in a more open-ended process. Some public agencies have difficulties working closely with „rival“ departments. Participation processes themselves can be very demanding and time-consuming and may not live up to expectations. The Tavistock study observes that, despite the benefits of partnership listed above, at present only a small minority of partnerships involved in Structural Funds procedures could be described as „serious decision making organisations“ (2). The rest exercise their influence from the sidelines, taking advantage of whatever openings become available to shape inter-ministerial negotiation processes. Partnerships created to promote sustainable development in the context of Structural Funds programmes face the additional difficulty of attempting to broaden the scope of programmes and projects towards sustainability „at arms length“ to decision-making authorities.

► Different Functions

The central question is not whether partnership is useful for promoting sustainable development but what kinds of partnership are needed to fulfil specific functions. The Tavistock study has defined three related purposes for partnership at the regional level:

1. Partnership for more effective *implementation*, drawing on those bodies which are responsible for programme implementation;
2. better targeting of programme actions, involving local partners familiar with the needs of their areas;
3. enhancing local development capacity, gaining benefits by a mutual learning process.

For programme areas interested to building partnerships for sustainability within their Structural Funds programmes this means asking the following questions:

● *Who* should be involved in the partnership? What agencies and individuals should be on board? How wide should the partnership spread? How far should key actors or chief executives be involved?

● *When* is partnership necessary or helpful to the programme? At what stage(s) in the programme's development – from programme design via project selection to ex-post evaluation – can partnership contribute most to sustainable development?

● *How* should partnerships be organised? What are the particular merits of expert workshops or public meetings? What functions can consultants best perform? How important is leadership?

● *What* can partnership realistically achieve? Is more partnership always better? When do the benefits – in terms of added value and consensus-building – outweigh the costs, in terms of time and staff resources?

► Mainstreaming Partnerships for Sustainability

These questions were addressed by twelve Objective 1 and 2 regions across Europe who were funded by the European Commission between 1997 and 1999 to conduct pilot projects on methods of promoting sustainable regional development by means of their Structural Funds programmes (3). Building partnerships for sustainability was a central task for most of the twelve regions. It was pursued, however, in very different ways – and with different degrees of success – reflecting their institutional and cultural diversity. Influential behind the selection of a particular form of partnership were, in particular,

- the prior experience of partnerships in the region,
- national policy styles,
- trends towards regionalisation or decentralisation and
- region-specific objectives for the pilot project.

The experiences of three regions illustrate well this variety, but also the degree to which partnerships for sustainability managed to influence mainstream programme management.

► Improving Cooperation between Stakeholders

The *Highlands and Islands* pilot project in the *United Kingdom* was designed to strengthen partnerships between regional and local actors. A series of workshops was held in ten localities

and for the region as a whole to identify and compare sustainability objectives in each territory. Participants included for the regional workshops members of the Programme Monitoring Committee and other public/voluntary bodies with a strategic interest in the European Objective 1 Programme, and for the local workshops most of the applicants to the current programme in the ten localities. This dual-level consultation exercise helped raise local confidence to shape Structural Funds projects according to local sustainability objectives and created greater sensitivity amongst regional partners for the development needs of the localities. However, the recommendations emerging from the workshops largely failed to be incorporated into the new Structural Funds programme since the exercise had largely been conducted alongside, rather than as an integral part of, programme development procedures.

► Winning Gaining Political Support

By contrast, the new partnership created by the pilot project in the *Eastern Scotland region* was from the start designed to win the support of programme managers for a common understanding of sustainable development for the region. A project steering group was formed of representatives from ten relevant agencies who each had a keen interest in sustainability and some influence within their own organisations. This group focused its activities on devising twelve core sustainability criteria with which to select projects for funding under the forthcoming Structural Funds programme. By involving the broader programme management team at key points the project steering group succeeded in ensuring that these core criteria were adopted in the region's new Single Programming Document. The partnership achieved the „mainstreaming“ of sustainability objectives by demonstrating how these could build on and improve existing development priorities.

► Mobilising of Local Interests

The *French* region of *Midi-Pyrénées* sought with its pilot project to use discussions of sustainable development in newly created local partnerships to strengthen the hand of local and regional authorities in the management of Structural Funds programmes. Programme management in France is the responsibility of state authorities at national, regional and county levels; the influence of local or regional authori-

ties is minimal. Indeed, the state authorities in *Midi-Pyrénées* attempted initially to block progress on the pilot project for challenging their interests. However, the sustainability partnership, by winning support for the pilot project's recommendations regionally and – above all – within the European Commission, succeeded in creating enough pressure for the state authorities to give greater consideration to its demands. As a result several of the pilot project's recommendations found their way into the new programming document.

► Conclusion

Partnerships are important building blocks of sustainable development but little thought is generally given to when and under what conditions partnership approaches are an effective means of promoting sustainable development. Partnership is widely held to be inherently good. There are, however, a number of points to be considered in order to achieve a meaningful partnership, particularly one designed to promote sustainability. The process of building quality regional partnerships, needs careful prior consideration of the intended purpose of a partnership, its potential members, structure and operational procedures and the institutional framework within which it will operate. In particular it requires a realistic appraisal of how far a partnership is equipped to influence mainstream regional policy and planning – a critical factor for the long-term effectiveness of partnerships for sustainability.

Notes

- (1) The Tavistock Institute: The Thematic Evaluation of the Partnership Principle: Final Synthesis Report. 1999, p.11.
- (2) *ibid*, p.24.
- (3) On the following, Moss, Timothy/ Fichter, Heidi: Regional Pathways to Sustainability. Experiences of Promoting Sustainable Development in Structural Funds Programmes in 12 Pilot Regions. Office of Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2000.

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Der Autor

Dr. Timothy Moss ist seit 1993 wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter und Projektleiter am Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung (IRS).

Kontakt: IRS, Flakenstraße 28-31,
15537 Erkner. Tel. 03362/ 793-185, Fax: -111,
E-mail: mosst@irs-net.de

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