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PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF SUSTAINABILITY ON THE LOCAL LEVEL: LESSONS FROM THE VIENNESE CASE

Local Agenda 21 (LA21) aims at fostering sustainable development at a local level. In 1998, the city of Vienna started off with a pilot-process in one district (out of 23). In 2002 a citywide association named “LA 21 in Vienna for the encouragement of citizens’ participation” was established to coordinate the LA21 of Vienna. Presently, after almost 10 years of experience, nine districts are conducting an LA21-process. As the name of the citywide association already indicates, the central focus of the Viennese LA21 lies on the development of a specific kind of participatory democracy on the district level. The LA21-processes are organised as open discussion forums nearly without thematic limitations. Citizens are actually encouraged to develop ideas and projects by themselves.

An accompanying evaluation of the ongoing LA21 activities started in 2004 and was finished in September 2007. The evaluation approach had two main functions: (1) to provide practical knowledge for supporting the learning processes of all involved stakeholders and through that help to develop the process design; and (2) to assess the substantial outcome of the LA21-processes in the districts. To meet those aims a participatory approach was chosen. The participatory evaluation was organised as an interactive and social process, which allowed involved stakeholders to deeply reflect and integrate findings.

In this paper, we give insights into the experiences with the participatory approach in Vienna. We will further report on empirical results; the most important evaluation outcomes as well as procedural findings. We refer to the LA21 in Vienna as a “multi-optional-mode” based on its combination of two different theoretical concepts: the one of participatory democracy and the conventional one of Local Agenda 21. Our results show that the LA21 in Vienna oscillates between these two concepts. Combining these two objectives is a rather high aim, which requires intellectual as well as material resources and strong political commitment on different levels.

Introduction

The concept of LA21 dates from 1992, when the programme of Agenda 21 was initiated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro. In order to put this global programme into action the document recommended in Chapter 28, that Agenda 21 should be implemented at the local level as well. Implementing Local Agenda 21 (LA21) promises a lot to our cities and communities: a sustainable development and future. In planning processes which follow the principles of Agenda 21, participation has high importance. Together with citizens and stakeholders visions are developed, priority issues determined and targets for action decided. With this strategy, a political culture based on consensus building should be established and urban life in the 21st century is promised to be more sustainable. According to ICLEI¹, Local Agenda 21 can be defined as “a participatory, multi-sectoral process to achieve the goals of Agenda 21 at the local level through the preparation and implementation of a long-term, strategic action plan that addresses priority local sustainable development concerns” (ICLEI 2004). Since the beginning in the early 1990s more than 6.500 local governments have started LA21 processes worldwide.

In 1998 the city of Vienna started with a limited pilot LA21 project in one district. Based on these first experiences the LA21 concept was extended to additional districts, starting in 2002. The Viennese process follows the strategy to achieve sustainability mainly by establishing “sustainable” forms of political participation. For that purpose the LA21 is mainly organised as an open discussion forum. Presently nine out of 23 districts are conducting LA21 processes and further districts may follow. The accompanying evaluation of the LA21 activities was carried through from summer 2004 till summer 2007. This timeframe of the evaluation covered the contractual period of six LA21-processes in different districts. The evaluation approach had two main functions: (1) to provide practical knowledge for supporting the learning processes of all involved stakeholders and through that help to develop the process design; and (2) to assess the substantial outcome of the LA21-processes in the districts. In order to meet these challenges we² developed a participatory evaluation approach based mainly on qualitative social research methods.

The first chapter of this paper describes the Viennese LA21, its strategy and the organisational design. In the second section we provide a theoretical review on participatory evaluation and describe our methodological design. The empirical results of this project are presented in the third section of the paper. This section includes characteristics of the Viennese LA21-process, positive potentials which can be beneficial for the districts development and factors that help achieving the project-goals. In section four the experiences with the specific methodological approach of participative evaluation are discussed, leading to a final conclusion in section five.

1. Local Agenda 21 in Vienna

Vienna, the federal capital of Austria, has approximately 1.8 million inhabitants. Politically, Vienna holds a unique position within Austrian governmental structures, since it is the federal capital of Austria, one of nine federal states, and a municipality with the special legal status of a statutory town. Thus, the Viennese local state has considerably wider powers than other municipalities. Vienna is further subdivided into 23 districts each holding some important decision-making powers, which however have little autonomy from the central authorities in legal terms (Astleithner & Hamedinger, 2003).

Because of the size of the city, the partial political autonomy of the districts, and the consequences of history, Local Agenda 21 is organised in a multilayered structure. To

¹ ICLEI is an acronym for the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. ICLEI is supposedly one of the “inventors” of LA21.

² This article was written by two of the three principal researchers.

understand this complex organisation, one has to look closer at its development, which has been marked by three distinct phases. In the initiating phase, the process was mainly driven by the city administration (particularly by civil servants within the departments of environmental protection and urban planning). In 1997, a comprehensive strategy for an LA21 for the entire city of Vienna was elaborated. This strategy, which put emphasis on technical expertise rather than citizens' involvement, never found political support (Pleschberger, 2000; Astleithner & Hamedinger, 2003). We call this first approach "classical LA21".

In this situation of political deadlock, an alternative approach emerged putting emphasis on citizen participation and institutional innovations ("participatory democracy"). The District Chairman of Alsergrund, the ninth district of Vienna, welcomed this idea and initiated a pilot project which started in 1998.

Local Agenda 21 in Vienna remained limited to a single district until spring 2002. At that time, a city-wide organisational-structure, the Association Local Agenda 21 in Vienna, was established and the process was extended to six districts (including Alsergrund), all part of the evaluation. At the present nine districts have an LA21 process running, the Association serves as a coordination office for the Agenda Districts and takes on additional responsibilities such as the financing of agenda processes, public relations work, and networking of Austrian and international activities (Feichtinger & Pregernig, 2005).



Figure 1: Organisational structure of the Viennese Local Agenda 21 (Source: Verein Lokale Agenda 21 in Wien 2007)

In the following we will describe the organisational set-up of the LA21. The *LA21 association Vienna* is the organisational basis and serves as the coordinating centre connecting the districts and the city administration. It consists of four different elements.

- In the *board of directors* decisions are made. The city council for city development presides; the other members are also from the city council and represent all political fractions.
- The *agenda agency* is responsible for the functional tasks. The central activities reach from coordination and management to information dissemination. Two persons are employed by the agency.
- The *board of advisors* elaborates recommendations and thereby the basis for decision-making, for example the selection of new Agenda-districts and Agenda offices. The members are partly scientists, partly experts from the city administration and the district council.

- The *LA21 team city administration* consists of 25 persons from different sections within the city administration. It should serve as a hub between the LA21 processes and the central administration of the city.
- The *LA21 platform* – an open discussion forum – takes place twice a year. It provides the opportunity for all active persons in the process to exchange experiences and information regarding the LA21 in Vienna.

In each Agenda district the following structure has been set up:



Figure 2: Organisational structure of the Viennese LA21-districts (Source: Verein Lokale Agenda 21 in Wien, 2008, modified)

- The *agenda office* serves as an organisational hub of the district-process, taking on tasks of project leadership and management. Agenda offices are run by different non-profit organisations with varying professional and thematic background.
- Additionally an *agenda steering committee* (Agenda Steuerteam) as an interface between citizen groups and district council is established. It consists of district politicians (from all parties), active citizens, and members of the agenda office and the agenda agency. Here the district-strategy is elaborated and discussed, as well as the acceptance of new project groups.
- *Project groups, working circles and discussion forums*: The active citizens work in different settings together, depending on the time recourses and needs. The most common form is the project group. A project group consists of 5 to 15 citizens working together on a specific topic for a longer period of time.
- The *district council* should assure the implementation of citizen's projects.

The Viennese process excels by its focus on participation by strengthening the ability of citizens to organise themselves autonomously for developing and designing their districts. The structure provides a basis where project ideas and sustainable guidelines can be developed and implemented. The LA21 is thus first of all an offer from the Viennese district council and administration to the citizens to get in contact on a local level. It tries to constitute a possibility to break up existing communication patterns by making a step towards participatory democracy.

2. Conceptual framework and research design

The evaluation aimed on the one hand to provide practical knowledge for supporting the learning processes of all involved stakeholders and through that help to develop the process design; and on the other hand to assess the substantial outcome of the LA21-processes in the districts. For meeting particularly the first aim, a concept of participatory evaluation, allowing continuous exchange, was applied. The concept of participatory evaluation opens the absolute monopoly of appraisal, through involvement and integration of all participating actors. Involving all different perspectives enables an all-embracing analysis of the complete context of intervention. Further, the collection of data is not considered in the traditional scientific way as an independent process, but instead evaluates different perceptions regarding the objective of the evaluation. New questions can be brought up; the evaluation should be geared towards frictions and deviations in the process. The negotiation of interests and the interpretation of data with the different stakeholders is repeated frequently (Ulrich and Wenzel 2003).

The participatory evaluation approach assures involvement and aims at practical relevance. The reporting of the results involves the description of open differences. The evaluation does not result in an "objective" report, but in a useful common (social) construction, arisen from a democratic negotiation process of different perceptions and interests. The report has to stress not only the results but the procedural elements of the evaluation as well (Ulrich and Wenzel 2003).

The evaluation thus becomes a social process and an impetus for deepened reflection. Greenwood and Levin (1998: 239) argue that participatory evaluation aims to create a learning process for the program recipients. The findings of the process should help them in their effort to reach desired goals. From this point of view the focus of participatory evaluation is on the impact or the process of the program. In other words it is a kind of formative evaluation judging the worth of a program while the program activities are forming or happening. *Summative* elements, which judge the worth of a program at the end of the activities, are of secondary importance.

Participatory evaluation could even go beyond this scope and include relevant stakeholders in the whole evaluation process from the very beginning: "Participatory evaluation is a process of self-assessment, collective knowledge production, and cooperative action in which the stakeholders in a development intervention participate substantively in the identification of the evaluation issues, the design of the evaluation, the collection and analysis of the data, and the action taken as a result of the evaluation findings" (Jackson and Kassam 1998: 3).

With this definition it becomes clear that participatory approaches are based on the ontological position of social constructivism, a position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being constructed by social actors (Bryman 2001). Therefore the evaluator is rather a member of the evaluation team together with some stakeholders than an external expert. As Patton argues, participatory evaluation becomes a collaborative action and loses an often-criticised aspect of conventional evaluation. "One of the negative connotations often associated with evaluation is that it is something done to people. One is evaluated. Participatory evaluation, in contrast, is a process controlled by the people in the program or community. It is something they undertake as a formal, reflective process for their own development and empowerment" (Patton 1990: 129). A participatory approach to evaluation gets the "buy-in" of as many stakeholders as possible, whereby they have a feeling of ownership over evaluation results. This helps to create an atmosphere where people want to learn about how and why programs are achieving results.

The timeframe of the LA21-evaluation covered the contractual period of the LA21-process in six districts (2004 to summer 2007). Following the above discussed principles of participatory evaluation we started by identifying the different stakeholders, who explained their

perceptions to the questions of evaluation. That very first phase ended with an evaluation workshop, where stakeholders discussed the evaluation questions and criteria for reaching these goals (see table 1). The evaluation workshop aimed at jointly ascertaining the objectives and questions of the evaluation. Representatives from the board of advisory, the LA21 team in the city administration, the agency, the agenda offices in the six districts and interested citizens, and politicians from the district council (all in all 30 participants) took an active part in this workshop. Three distinctive foci of evaluation-questions have been identified and discussed:

- The contribution of the LA21-processes in the districts to sustainable development,
- the encouragement of citizen-participation and
- suitability of the organisational structure.

Each focus contained several sub-questions, which have been specified in small working groups and afterwards weighted according to the importance.

The most significant participatory element for the evaluation was the so called reflection group which was established right after the evaluation workshop. It consisted of 11 members who were all deputies from the same boards and groups as in the workshop above. The reflection group was formed to accompany the evaluation continuously, discussing the progress, empirical results and orientation of the evaluation. Within the reflection group results of the different empirical phases were presented frequently which gave incentives to discuss. It also examined strategic and operational obstacles, contradictions and possible solutions for the LA21-processes. Adaptations regarding the evaluation focus were discussed as well.

In the empirical fieldwork quantitative and qualitative data was collected in three distinct phases: (1) a starting survey, containing around 50 qualitative interviews with all involved actors on the different levels from October 2004 to May 2005; (2) case studies in each of the six districts from October 2005 to summer 2006; the third phase (3) was methodologically planned similarly to the starting survey and focused on change and developments since the very beginning of the evaluation. Phase three was conducted from October 2006 till summer 2007. The final survey allowed a comparison with the starting survey to compile “lessons learned” for the future development of the Viennese model. Important in those phases was that the drawn conclusions were frequently “fed-back” into the negotiation process to all the different stakeholders.

The following table gives an overview of the steps of the evaluation:

Starting survey		2004			2005			2006			2007		
1	kick-off meeting	■											
2	explorative interviews with LA21-teams in the districts	■	■										
3	analysis of relevant documents	■	■										
4	evaluation workshop 1		■										
5	qualitative Interviews with central actors		■	■									
6	interviews with active citizens		■	■									
7	standardised telephone survey (n=500)		■	■									
8	presentation and discussion in reflection group					P							
9	presentation to central actors					P							
Six parallel case studies													
10	analysis of relevant documents					■	■	■	■	■			
11	participative observation					■	■	■	■	■			
12	presentation to central actors							P					
13	qualitative interviews							■	■				

“Bottom-up” versus “top-down”

According to the proclaimed Viennese “bottom-up” approach citizens-groups should develop projects around their own ideas. However the research showed that examples of “top-down” initiatives exist in Vienna. Top-down in this case means, that certain topics are on the agenda of the district policy anyway and are at the same time relevant to citizens, for example to renew a public park. In such a case it is likely that the district chairman or the agenda office invites citizens to form a LA21 working group around this theme. Problems occurred when these top-down groups were treated and organised the same way as bottom-up groups. Bottom-up groups start to define a common goal, to develop an idea and often meet for more than one year on a regular basis. In some cases top-down groups have elaborated comprehensive solutions, e.g. for the complete renewal of a street or a park. However, the citizen’s work is not sufficiently embedded in and connected to the parallel ongoing political process on the district level taking place around the same theme at the same time. Several groups have afterwards been confronted with the accusation that the population of the district does not legitimate their ideas. As a reaction to this situation some groups organized representative surveys in order to gain support from the local population. Such a strategy could be successful (in the case that the population supports the concept of the working group), but it is also likely that it fails. Accompanying surveys could be useful, however, as a general principle for participatory democracy it seems to be insufficient.

The problem of top-down versus bottom-up was discussed already in the first meeting with the *reflection group*. It soon became clear that these two types should be treated differently in the future. While bottom-up projects could be organized well as it has been done so far, top-down groups should be involved much more in the political decision-making process. Additionally it was suggested to use well-established participation methods for top-down-projects, e.g. round-tables, focus groups, planning cells, or planning for real.

Project-group Agenda

The project group is the central element of the Viennese LA21. Although this was not intended over the years, project groups seemed to be the most important indicator for the performance of the agenda offices as well as for the success of the whole process. We therefore labelled the Viennese process “project-group agenda”. Despite a lot of differences in detail, the comparison of project groups in the six districts showed some striking similarities. In most cases a project group consists of a relatively long-term stable core group with between three and seven highly active citizens. Around the core group exists in many LA21-projects a larger number of interested citizens who are more loosely connected to the project and support the activities of the core group from time to time.

Active citizens could be described as a rather homogenous group. To a large extent we found people between 25-40 years, with high formal qualification, with experiences and skills to work in groups. Active citizens are affected by local problems and often provide the professional ability to change things. Women and men are involved to the same extent. People with immigrant background are extremely rare. Adolescents and young adults participate either selectively or in groups working specifically on youth-topics. Internet access and e-mail use are important prerequisites for participation.

Focus on planning issues

In the Viennese LA21 projects excel by their clear thematic focus on planning. Nearly two-thirds of all groups dealt with such issues. The rest of the activities included a variety of topics like art, culture, history, youth, migration, diversity, social networks, and communities.

The particular importance of planning issues can first of all be explained by the fact that the LA21 in Vienna is introduced on the district level only. There seems to be an affinity between the political and legal competence of the district and the chosen topics in the working groups to a large extent. A second reason is that all working groups are dependent on voluntary citizens; people who want to contribute to the community development on a voluntary basis.

In Vienna this applies to people who are affected by negative developments in their neighbourhood and to people with – what we would call – professional concerns. This type of active citizens are not necessarily affected directly by a problem, rather it is their professional background, a specific kind of education (in most cases at university level), and the motivation to change things for the better which motivates. Often-found examples of such professional citizens are architects, landscape planners, and people with a socio science background.

3.2. Positive Effects through LA21-project groups

The second empirical phase focused on the citizens-groups' work and its effect and impact on the development of the district. In each of the six districts one LA21-project served as a case study. Those case studies were typical for the district, had at least one year of experience, a noticeable interaction with politicians and administration and had already a kind of result to show.

As already mentioned in Vienna two thirds of the projects are focused on public space, traffic and urban planning issues. The smaller part contains social and cultural topics. Economic topics are rarely addressed. Citizens engaged in LA21-projects spent their leisure time with the project to a remarkable extent. The engagement is voluntary and on a non-profit-basis. Estimation in figures makes it clearer: every Agenda-group (till the inquiry in summer 2006) provided between 370 to 840 hours of voluntary work. As working hours we define the meetings within the group and the participation on public LA21-events. That makes approximately 3000 working hours for all six case studies together. "Extrapolated" to all existing Agenda groups (in November 2006) 36.000 hours were invested voluntarily (based on the arithmetic mean of the case studies). If all 36.000 hours were provided by one person it would have taken 21 years on the job.

Through the rule of long-term cooperation from Agenda-groups new social capital is built up. Based on Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) we define social capital as a social resource consisting of mutual trust and social networks. The case-studies showed that through the LA21-engagement new social capital of high quality was built up. We talk about new social capital as the members of the Agenda-groups usually did not know each other before their engagement in LA21. The quality of the social capital is evaluated high, as the core group of the LA21-project works on average for three years on a self-determined project, the trust between the group-members is very good and in all cases the group itself got linked to further networks through the agenda office and the agenda agency.

The case studies showed as well that the LA21 could be seen as a new institution that deals with conflicts and prejudices in a different way. Some of the LA21-groups have a direct connection to foster understanding and communication, like the group "inter-religious dialogue" or "JUNE – Youth in Essling". The new approach to increase understanding excels through not focusing directly on conflicts but following a more pro-active strategy. Both projects were based on the intention to enable possibilities for exchange of separated social groups (adults and adolescents in one case, different religious communities in the other). On the district level the same phenomena was observed, agenda offices try to conciliate between different interests.

The concept of sustainable development was considered in all six case studies. On the project level we found some very instructive examples of how sustainability issues have been picked out by group members. The case studies that focused on social questions discussed more thoroughly the social aspects of sustainable development, while case studies with planning focus seemed to deal with the concept of sustainability in a broad way. The latter for instance underpinned their planning proposals with arguments based on sustainability-documents. The actual impact on sustainable development through group-activities has to be discussed separately from the reflection of sustainability concepts within the group: That a planning-project contributes to sustainability is not in the groups' responsibility only, it is rather depending on the realization, on many other actors in Vienna and on the degree of

utilization (case study “Thurnstiege). Groups with social focus could easier see an impact on sustainability, because aim and effects were rather within the possibilities and competencies of the group.

The analysed case studies also showed, that the process of discussions and decision-finding in combination with the institutional connection to the political process on district level could provide a valuable contribution to the practice of participative democracy. For solving certain problems LA21-groups can be considered as intermediation between politicians and citizens, they work independently and creatively, consult and discuss. LA21-groups can help to solve difficult or politically “deadlocked” issues (Thurnstiege).

3.3. Success factors – Lessons learned

We conclude the results with providing some of the important success factors that help to optimally realize the goals of agenda groups. To process the LA21-projects in a most optimal way, the following factors need to be fulfilled:

- **External support for Agenda-groups:** The citizens groups need organisational or content-related support from the Agenda-offices in order to be long term stable. From the perspective of the Agenda groups the Agenda-offices provide essential work for the groups, they support flexible according to the group’s needs.
- **To early clarify roles, interfaces and handling of results:** This point is very important for a smooth relation between politicians and citizens and the political alignment with the project.
- **Aim at realistic goals and tasks:** This claim refers to the work within the LA21-groups, depending on the competencies of the district and the capacities of the group. It facilitates (small) achievements which increase the motivation of the group-members. The responsibility for setting realistic goals rests with the agenda-offices.
- **To maintain the dynamic of development:** This aspect deals with the supervision of the groups. Here the already mentioned flexible support is meant: groups that are in a decreasing dynamic can be motivated actively from the Agenda-office.
- **Sustainability-“Mainstreaming“:** If all different boards and institutions (administration, polity on city and district level, project-partners, etc.) work actively with the sustainability-concept, it will improve the LA21-process. The sustainability concept gives orientation on an abstract level, which makes synchronization at the level of the project easier.

4. Methodological discussion

From a methodological point of view we are not so much interested in the outcomes of the evaluation as described above, but all the more in process-related aspects. The aim of this section is therefore to critically reflect our experiences in reference to basic principles of the chosen participatory evaluation approach. Getting back to what was said in the second section we will here cover the following points: aim of the evaluation, procedural aspects, the focus of analysis, and the role of involved parties. These results are based on internal discussions in the evaluation team and derived from a final feedback meeting with the client (agenda agency).

Aim of evaluation

As already mentioned the approach of participatory evaluation approaches aims at practical relevance and sensible impact. Results should therefore be produced as soon as possible in order to support ongoing activities. The evaluation should create a social learning process that helps programme managers in their effort to reach desired goals.

In the beginning of the evaluation we were confronted with a large number of already formulated research questions but it was not clear whether answers to those questions would support the local activities. In the first workshop it soon became clear that different questions might be of different interest for different stakeholders. Representatives from the city of Vienna for instance were interested to learn more about the ecological impact of LA21 activities or to assess the performance of the agenda offices using gender mainstreaming or diversity criteria. Citizens on the other hand claimed that the role of local politicians should be considered in more detail (see above: "multi-optional-model"). In spite of this huge variety of demands workshop participants unanimously agreed that the evaluation should first of all serve as a platform for reflection and learning. It was decided that outcomes should be addressed to politicians, agenda offices, and citizens. In conclusion it can be said that the decision to conduct a formative evaluation have been supported by all relevant stakeholders.

According to our client the evaluation had a number of direct impacts on the LA21 process. In most cases the central agenda agency itself was responsible for changes or could stimulate relevant activities. On the one hand the evaluation produced reflexive knowledge about the LA21-process. Usually this was done by collecting data of various sources and interpreting this data in a comparative way. In order to communicate such reflexive knowledge we coined certain phrases like "project group agenda" or "multi-optional-model" which turned out to be quite appropriate for stimulating discussions in the reflection group as well as in the wider LA21 public. On the other hand our research revealed some weak points, e.g. problems concerning the cooperation between citizen groups and local policy maker. Those problems in most cases led to concrete activities to overcome the reported problems. Just to give one example: As it turned out that each district had its own procedure of decision-making the central agenda agency started to produce a handbook on quality standards for the whole process. The evaluation was not the only reason for this kind of learning but it stimulated a number of changes and provided a more solid basis for decisions.

Focus of analysis

It may be typical for participatory approaches that there are no clear benchmarks and that there are a number of open questions instead of a clear focus. Indeed, this was the situation in our project. Especially in the beginning the whole context of the Viennese LA21 was on the research agenda. Later, after having given a broad description of the entire process we could concentrate on some specific questions step-by-step. It is also important to mention that our approach was open for new questions and/or to shift the original focus. Most notably this happened in the beginning when we invited all relevant stakeholders to the kick-off workshop. As a result this led to even more questions. When we discussed the final survey the second relevant shift was made. Instead of repeating the starting survey it was decided to concentrate more on lessons learned than on the original intention.

Procedural aspects

The evaluation was designed to meet participatory criteria (see section two). There was a so-called reflection group as a kind of extended client. This group consisted of most relevant stakeholders (agenda agency, agenda offices, policy-maker, civil servants) – only citizens have not been part in this group. Additionally at certain points in the process the entire agenda public was invited too (workshops, presentations). Although necessary conditions were provided from a procedural point of view, it was not easy to establish what one may call a "participatory" culture. Learning in the evaluation could hardly be described as a democratic negotiation process. In most cases we had to discuss the interpretation of results with only a small number of representatives of our client. Only two contact persons usually reviewed reports. This was partly due to by practical reasons (the more people are involved the more time and effort is necessary), partly, because the client did not support it. The relevance of the reflection group was notably in decline in the last part of the evaluation.

Role of involved parties

Participatory evaluation also requires a new definition of roles. The evaluator should be a member of the evaluation team together with some stakeholders rather than an external expert. The process should be designed as a collaborative action aiming at mutual shared results. Stakeholders therefore must be able to develop a feeling of ownership. In our case these standards could only partly be fulfilled. From our perspective as evaluators it was possible to act as team members in most meetings but for some representatives of our client it was difficult till the end to accept this situation. Although we had several discussions on this issue the desire for “external” and “objective” assessment were upright till the end of the evaluation.

5. Conclusions

For over three years we had the opportunity to accompany the Viennese LA21 process. In that time we have learned a lot – about participatory democracy, political processes on the district level, the problems of making sustainability happen, and not least about participatory evaluation itself. Some of these experiences have been presented and discussed in this paper.

The chosen approach turned out to be a good decision. Our client as well as relevant stakeholders supported the participatory design right from the start. Based on this commitment we were able to contribute new and – according to our client – helpful knowledge of the LA21 process. In retrospect we could say that this strong commitment was the most important precondition for running a participatory evaluation.

A major task of our work was to prepare precise descriptions of selected LA21 activities and procedures. The challenge in this regard was to draw a picture that represents as many perspectives and stakeholders as possible, showing consensus as well as dissent. In the starting survey this was done by a huge number of qualitative interviews, covering the whole range of involved social players. Only through this process did critical points and practical problems become evident and possible strategies to react to those problems developed.

Being open for new ideas, questions and procedural changes – as is specific for participatory approaches – means that one has to be flexible in several terms. Within the framework of a research project, with a given time schedule and fixed financial resources, this requires flexibility not only from the evaluation team but also from the sponsor. In our case this flexibility was given on both sides. The evaluation therefore became a fruitful common learning process.

Based on our experiences some methodological aspects deserve closer attention in the future. If the outcome of a participatory evaluation should be produced in a democratic way, it must be clear what “socially constructed” could mean in the context of a research project. It may be necessary to build upon a basic set of rules. Participatory evaluation research could therefore profit a lot from participatory democracy literature.

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