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Facilitation in Territorial Economic Development

The development of territories is a complex, dynamic and continuous process, where past successes or failures are not necessarily predictive of future outcomes. This unpredictability is generally a source of discomfort for many people and organisations working on supporting territorial development processes. This can result in desires, often by external players, to seek simple solutions, to search for linear cause and effect relations and ultimately to contain the seeming “disorder” in order to embark on a process of territorial development.

Facilitation in such a context requires openness to mobilise local stakeholders, to promote the sharing of insight and knowledge and to create



a space in which diverse perspectives and opinions can be uncovered, patterns discerned and understanding can emerge. It thus presupposes that there is no one way/truth that one person or stakeholder has, but that different stakeholders hold pieces of that truth, and the facilitator plays a critical role in connecting role players and stimulating organic emergence of bottom-up solutions to challenges.

Process facilitation includes a number of interventions,

which may include engaging in critical discussions with different role players to understand the context. Training could be a valid intervention if there is a dearth of important knowledge or insight which could hamper the process. Analysis of value chains or sub-economic sectors is also an example of possible interventions, amongst others. Process facilitation also includes the broader realm of designing and facilitating complex multi-stakeholder processes that may be undertaken over a period of several years.



This calls for a need to design and implement a long-term process that requires an understanding not only of the thematic area of territorial development, but also of process work and the related issues of human social and political behaviour. This facilitation should include the need for good process design – facilitation explores the diversity of views and perspectives, historical patterns of behaviour amongst key stakeholders, power relations and existing conflicts, and it also builds the capacity of stakeholders to effectively participate and create a supportive institutional environment. Workshop facilitation, on the other hand, is rather tightly focused on meeting the objectives of one particular workshop. The tools and techniques are considered on the basis that they will best achieve the predetermined objectives of the workshop and harness individual and group input to achieve results.

Much of this article thus refers to process facilitation, which includes workshop facilitation. An important part of process facilitation is to recognise and be aware of the fact that even when diverse stakeholders and representatives of different organisations reach decisions during a workshop or during the improvement process, change within organisations must still take place. We often assume that when representatives of stakeholder organisations agree to something in a meeting or workshop that they can drive change in their representative organisations. Additionally, facilitators must have an acute awareness of the following factors that are at play in the context of complex territorial processes:

- The interconnection of the economic, social, political, environmental and spatial spheres that impact on territorial development, amongst others.
- The reality of the uncertainty of future desired and undesired consequences.



- Multiple stakeholders have diverse interests at multiple scales, many of these being vested interests.
- Causes and effects and costs and benefits are often separated across time and space with significant implications for human motivation.
- There are externalities in the broader economic system.
- There is a huge variety of tools, instruments and knowledge resources available that need to be selected and deployed carefully in accordance with the current status and requirements of the territorial development process.

Our experience is that much of the territorial economic development facilitation role is conducted by external facilitators who are often contracted for

a brief period of time to direct a change process by engaging diverse stakeholders, and by creating a conducive environment for trust building, open sharing of experience and insight, networking, joint analysis and co-operation between the various stakeholders in a territory. Such a facilitator often possesses the core competencies and skills to ensure that different participatory, analytical and communication strategies are used during the process to ensure maximum engagement and ownership of the process. In order to generate an environment of trust and open sharing, it is imperative that the facilitator is seen as neutral and open to the emergent process, rather than being set on a particular outcome, ideology or agenda.

The truth is that facilitators have particular world views developed over years of experience. They are generally directed by the contracting party towards a preconceived and often well-planned, intended outcome of a process. This requires facilitators to be able to understand and own these personal perceptions, world views and desires of the contracting party. At the same time, they need to have the ability to separate these from the reality of the facilitated process as a prerequisite to being open to listening to what is emerging, without judgement, as well as the ability to connect and track thoughts and ideas shared to gain meaning, encourage learning and develop insight into the change process of territorial development. This integrity, knowledge and self-understanding are an imperative starting point for facilitation of complex territorial development. In addition, facilitators have to design processes that enable the use of creative communication techniques as well as innovative instruments and tools that are participatory and developmental in nature. Concretely, in our work we collect narratives about the local stakeholders' vision of territorial development, which can then be quantified. Also, uncovering the stakeholders' myths about their regional economy can be very useful in changing existing mindsets. When assessing local economies we work with tools that permit us to visualise these different (possibly conflicting) perspectives.

The complexity of territorial development requires facilitators to use these facilitation tools, techniques and instruments, to draw in persons with divergent views over and above the "typical" territorial



development stakeholders and to stimulate the challenging and questioning of the status quos in order to grow insight and learning from the change process. This is a process rather than a once-off event, and as such it can be compromised if it is entirely dependent on an external facilitator who is intermittently "on the ground".

Territorial development processes need to be sustained in the relevant context with the relevant



actors participating, rather than being heavily reliant on external facilitators. The active involvement of local actors in the process strengthens their solution-seeking capacities and their ability to sustain development processes. It is thus imperative that the capacity of local stakeholders is developed so that they are able to continue facilitating the territorial development process subsequent to the involvement of the external facilitator. The reality is, however, that many stakeholders who see the value of such

facilitated processes cannot find traction for this additional responsibility within their institutions or organisations. This is why donor agencies and government institutions should increasingly focus on training local multipliers who are able to facilitate processes in complex contexts and that this facilitation task is recognised as a critical job function.

Zini Godden (zg@mesopartner.com)
Anke Kaulard (ak@mesopartner.com)