Adaptability of Backcasting for Sustainable Development: A Case Study from Nepal

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ABSTRACT

To cope with problems like climate change, lack of food security, and poverty, a more reasonable use of existing resources is needed. Hence, a transition towards a sustainable behavior in the industrial as well as the developing countries is of core importance. Transition management and backcasting are two methodologies that have been developed mainly in the Netherlands to achieve this behavioral change. This paper examines in a case study, in a small village in the mid-hills of Nepal, whether these methodologies are also applicable in a developing country. Moreover it analyzes which adjustments are needed to achieve good outcomes. First results show that this methodology seems to be appropriate to trigger a change in thinking towards long-term considerations amongst the small scale farmers. Long-range thinking and future envisioning can stimulate investments in technologies that tend to be sustainable and guarantee a more stable return in the long run. Compared to programs in Europe, instructors should adjust time frame and workshop design.

Key words: Future Envisioning, Mid-Hills, Participation, Rural Development, Small-Scale Farmers, Social Network Analysis, Transition Agenda, Transition Management

1. INTRODUCTION

The past decades of development cooperation have repeatedly shown that the approaches that have been used to achieve development have in many cases failed. Especially in Nepal, where an average of 400 million USD has been transferred annually to the country (Sharma, Koponen, Gyawali, & Dixit, 2004), there are many examples showing that this development aid did not fulfill its mission. E.g., poverty has not declined in a satisfactory rate (Bramer Mihaly, 1965; Ghimire, 2009; Khadka, 1997; Sharma et al., 2004).

The missing participation of addressees of development cooperation projects has been identified in many cases as one of the main reasons for the partial or sometimes even total failure of projects (Hoggett, Mayo, & Miller, 2009). As one of the major outcomes of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 the donors clearly stated the importance of participation and creating ownership for projects.
Different approaches to involve the local people into all phases of the project have been developed over the years, the most common being the Participative Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Farmer Field Schools. Still though, the success rate of many projects is low, and the approaches and projects have generally failed to trigger a long-term, sustainable change in behavior.

In the course of time it became apparent that the idea of “development” is not equivalent with winning the battle against poverty. Many projects that promoted modern techniques or ideas actually aggravated the difficult situation, as they were not appropriate for the region. In particular, agricultural modernization in many cases led to depletion of resources and new environmental problems (Hoggett et al., 2009; Shrestha, 2009). Thus, the focus of many projects shifted from a mere economic development towards a sustainable form of development with consideration of long-term effects and the environment as well (Williams, 1998).

Still though, many problems persist and farmers’ behavior is mainly short-term focused. People in developing countries often see themselves faced with serious everyday problems that endanger their existence and keep them from thinking or planning in the long term. If there is an acute problem of securing basic livelihood necessities, problems such as global warming or soil degradation will lose in importance (Hellin & Haigh, 2002). Especially in Nepal, where insurance schemes play a very small role and there is virtually no health insurance scheme, people suffer very much in case of personal tragedies like disease or death, because besides the personal grief, many times a death or a pronounced disease also means economic problems for the families. If an adult is the victim, they lose a bread winner and at the same time often have to cover up for hospital bills that can be immense, especially in rural areas (Hotchkiss, Rous, Karmacharya, & Sangraula, 1998). Instead of investing and planning for the far future, many families save everything they can to be prepared for such calamity and thus do not plan in the long term (Adhikary, 2000; Shrestha, 2009).

Problems of overuse of resources and unsustainable behavior of individuals also exist in industrial countries, where people have sufficient knowledge and also possibilities to behave sustainably (Davies, Doyle, & Pape, 2012). However, most of the people do not act correspondingly. There is a gap between a desired behavior in consideration of sustainability criteria and the actual behavior of the single person that needs to be bridged. A methodology from the field of action research called transition management tries to address this gap and targets the entire system for a transition instead of having just a problem focus. One instrument of transition management is backcasting, a tool that entitles future envisioning and highly participative workshops to work out a transition agenda as a road map towards the desired vision.

Backcasting seems to be a suitable tool to achieve a behavioral change in people towards sustainable behavior, so it could be an appropriate tool in development cooperation as well. In this paper, we examine in the form of a case study the applicability and the adjustments that have to be made to apply backcasting in a country like Nepal with its different cultural and social background.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Transition Management

Transition Management is an approach to manage and foster transitions. It evolved mainly because other approaches proved to not solve societal problems that we are facing today like climate change, water scarcity, pollution and depletion of resources. In problem or project centered approaches, systemic errors were not identified or solved with hitherto existing approaches, and instead of solving problems, they often become engrained (D. Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010). Transition management as a system approach appears to be a possibility to avoid these difficulties and deal with them.
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