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Evaluating Regional Governance - Methodological Concerns and Practical Experiences

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Evaluating Regional Governance: Methodological Concerns and Practical Experiences

Abstract

Since the early 1990s, new forms of regional governance have spread over Western Europe. So far, they have hardly been subject to systematic evaluations. There might be several reasons for this shortcoming. First, the regional governance concept still lacks a clear definition; without knowing what regional governance is, it is hardly feasible to “test” for its outcomes. Moreover, regional governance systems and processes are marked by continuous and rapid transformations. Hence it is difficult to capture their impacts. Finally, the complexity of regional development processes render the assessment of the institutional background a methodological challenge. In the face of these considerations, this paper pursues a threefold objective. First, the authors explain the various needs of evaluating regional governance approaches. These include matters of efficiency, accountability and democratic control. Second, the paper discusses the methodological tasks and pitfalls that evaluators need to tackle in order to assess the benefits and weaknesses of regional governance processes. Third, the paper provides an insight into German evaluation experiences in the field. The state-of-the-art is illustrated by various examples, among others the program evaluations of regional development concepts in Thuringia and Saxony and the process-based evaluation of the REGIONALEN in North Rhine-Westphalia, carried out by ILS NRW in Dortmund. The paper concludes by deducing recommendations on how to evaluate regional governance.

Key words

regional governance, evaluation, regional development

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1 The need of evaluating regional governance

Over the last 15 years, different forms of “regional governance” have spread over Western Europe. Only few of them have been evaluated systematically. Neither the efficiency nor the effects of the new steering models has been seriously questioned and tested so far. Both political and methodological reasons seem to hinder the application of common evaluation techniques in the fields urban and regional development. In this section, we define the term “regional governance” (section 1.1) and provide an overview of the various types of regional governance emerging in Germany since the early 1990s (section 1.2). We then enlist a couple of arguments stressing the need of evaluating regional cooperations (section 1.3).

1.1 The concept of regional governance

The concept of “regional governance” has become increasingly popular in the fields of political, social and regional science as well as regional policy. It is yet far from being clearly defined. The understandings of governance rank from “the complex art of steering multiple agencies, institutions and systems” (Jessop 1997, 13), to “the shaping and sustaining of the arrangements of authority and power” (Kötter 2002, 30), “the ability to address problems that may recognize neither political lines nor temporal administrations” (Dimento and Graymer 1991, 2) or “self-organizing, interorganizational networks characterized by independence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state” (Rhodes 1997, 15). In this paper, we adopt the definition of Benz (2003) who views regional governance as “the structures and processes of steering and coordination in regions” (Benz 2003, 5). Interpreted in this way, regional governance stands for a phenomenon which is widely perceivable in the EU member states: the emergence of “an ‘in-between’ scale of governance, between strong municipalities and strong states (nation states or powerful subnational bodies)” (Healey 2002, 13).

There are several reasons for the increasing relevance of the regional level: In many countries, resources and competencies are gradually delegated to regional governments such as the Swedish *regioner* or the *regioni* and *province* in Italy. In some of the German *Länder*, “regional councils” or “regional conferences” were established to take on the coordination of structural policies. However, the rising importance of the regional level is not primarily due to the active delegation of tasks and competencies, but also emerges in a “bottom-up”-direction: Businesses (re-)discover the advantage of regional production and supply clusters; residents develop regional commuting, shopping and leisure patterns; and local jurisdictions come together in order to tackle problems which they cannot solve on their own any longer (e.g. public transport, open space policies, marketing) (Fürst 2003). A key feature of most of the new institutional structures labelled as regional governance consists in the cooperation among governments and private and non-profit organizations and the establishment of partnerships and networks between the public and the private sector (e.g. Rhodes 1997; Cooke et al. 2000; Swenson and Östhol 2001; Hamilton 2002; Benz 2003; Gualini 2004).

Table 1: Government vs. Governance

Government	Governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vertical - firmly institutionalised - formal - directed from above - higher level government (e.g. states) connects through demarcated procedures - emphasizes the centralizing features of regionalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - horizontal - flexible - informal - self-regulating - lower level governance (e.g. inter local agreements) is looser and less confined by boundaries - stresses the decentralizing virtues of local cooperation

Source: Savitch/Vogel 2000, 161

Compared to traditional government, governance is marked by horizontal (or “heterarchical”) rather than vertical networks and by flexible, informal and self-regulating structures (see table 1). The informal character of regional governance has led to a variety of different forms subject to frequent changes and developments. In the following section, we provide a brief typology of regional governance in Germany.

1.2 Regional governance in Germany – an overview

The federal state of Germany comprises 16 *Länder* with own legislative competencies. In the 1990s, most of the *Länder* started to delegate competencies to the regional level or directly contributed to the establishment of “regional conferences”, “regional development concepts” or “regional agenda processes”. In Thuringia, the regions were asked to draw “regional development concepts”, in Schleswig-Holstein the state government promoted “city-hinterland-cooperations”, while in North Rhine-Westphalia “regional conferences”, “regional councils” and – in some parts of the state – so-called REGIONALEN were initiated (see sections 3.2-3.5). In addition, the federal state carried out national programs such as the model projects “city networks” and “regions of the future” or “InnoRegio” in order to foster the institutionalisation of regional networks. In some cases, local jurisdictions (i.e. cities and municipalities) also joined on their own initiative in order to develop and to market regional tourism destinations or to organise public tasks such as public transport. Altogether, a confusing variety of regional partnerships and networks has evolved over the last 15 years. Diller (2002), who carried out a comprehensive empirical investigation on “informal regional networks” in Germany, counts more than 400 examples. By the year 2005, this number might have even increased.

Several German experts - geographers, planners and political scientists - have tried to shed light on the “regional governance jungle” by developing appropriate typologies. Benz (2003) uses three criteria to define types of regional governance: the actors involved, the system of regulation and the stability of relations (see table 2). The most stable form of regional governance is represented by regional jurisdictions, such as the newly established “Hannover Region”, the most flexible one is constituted by “regional networks” based on negotiations. According to Benz (2003), regional conferences are the most popular type of regional governance in Germany.

Table 2: Types of Regional Governance in Germany

	actors involved	system of regulation	stability of relations
regional jurisdiction	broad, public actors (state, region, municipalities), fixed partners	top-down regulation, financial incentives, redistribution of revenues	institutionalised
regional „multi-level structures“	broad, public actors (state, region, municipalities), private actors, rather open	negotiations in the „shadow of hierarchy“	institutional framework, contracts and networks
regional planning association	clearly defined, public actors (state planning departments/ municipalities), fixed partners	regulation by binding plans, negotiations	institutionalised, networks
interorganisational structure	broad, public & private actors, rather open	competition, negotiations and contracts	rather flexible
regional conference	broad, public & private actors, rather open	negotiations, partly with incentives	weakly institutionalised
regional network	broad, public & private actors, rather open	negotiations	networks

Source: Benz 2003, 24, translation SP

A more inductive classification of regional governance is provided by Diller (2002). In his empirical analysis, Diller concentrates on informal regional networks and groups them, among others, according to their main purpose (solution to conflicts / regional development), the spatial level and the actors involved (see table 3).

Table 3: Types of informal regional cooperations in Germany

Type of cooperation	cooperations for conflict solutions / mediation processes	development-oriented cooperations					
		regional planning approaches			structural policy approaches		„event-oriented“
		„regional studies“	city networks	regional agenda-21 processes	reg. development concepts / conferences	regional marketing initiatives	regional building exhibitions, EXPOs
spatial level	small areas / specific locations	parts of a region	„points“ in a region / whole region	region / part of a region	region / part of a region	region / part of a region	region / part of a region; decentral coop.
themes addressed	transport, waste treatment, nature reserves et al.	all issues addressed by integrated planning	e.g. modernisation of public administration, tourism, ...	all issues of sustainable development	e.g. tourism, labour market, technology, innovation, transp	image, innovation, labour market, assistance to businesses	depending on the motto: open space, brown fields, technology, housing
actors involved	sect. planning departments, municipalities, citizens, lobbyists	municipalities, counties, sectoral-/regional-/state planning departments	municipalities, businesses, regional planning departments	reg. planning dep., counties, municipalities, counties, businesses, ...	businesses, municipalities, counties, region, citizens, project developers		development agency, municipalities, represent. of superior level, project developers
pioneering Länder, model projects	Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Baden-Württemberg	Bavaria	national model projects		Lower Saxony, Northrhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, national model projects	Bavaria, Saxony	IBA Emscher-Park, EXPO Hannover

Source: adapted from Diller 2002, 86, translation SP

The typologies of Benz (2003) and Diller (2000) evidence the impressive variety of regional governance in Germany. Both incentives from superior tiers of government (EU, federal state, *Länder*) and the pressures deriving from globalised trade relations and shrinking tax revenues lead municipalities, businesses and third sector actors to come together and to establish new forms of regional cooperation. The situation can be compared to a large field trial: All over the country, regional conferences, “round tables”, city networks, marketing initiatives and further types of regional networks emerge, partly become institutionalised, partly vanish after only a few months or years of existence.

1.3 Is it necessary to evaluate regional governance approaches?

So far, there have been only few attempts to evaluate the effects or the efficiency of the new steering models evolving at regional level. This shortcoming is partly due to the novelty of the phenomenon: The majority of regional cooperations is only a few years old. Moreover, rapid changes complicate a systematic assessment of the ongoing processes and their impacts. According to the public choice theory, the ‘landscape’ of German regional governance at the verge of the 21st century constitutes an ideal-type situation of competing steering models – in the long run, the “fittest” models best suiting the needs of citizens and businesses shall “survive”. Is it indispensable to evaluate the single “plants” growing on the fertile ground of regional cooperation? Since decades, the needs of evaluating public interventions have been controversially discussed. In the view of its opponents, most evaluations represent a rather useless attempt to assess the effects of public programmes, policies, measures and projects. The criticisms are mainly based on methodological reservations, namely the complexity of cause-effect-relations (see sections 3.4). However, the evaluation literature provides a series of important arguments in favour of systematic evaluations. In the following, we report some of the main reasons which, in our view, explain the necessity of evaluating the success of regional governance models and programs. Most of the arguments are regularly mentioned in the evaluation literature.

- *transparency / accountability*: One of the main drivers of evaluations consists in the desire to control public expenditures: “Politicians, administrators, and professionals should, of course, be accountable for the way in which they spend taxpayers’ money.” (Burgers and Vranken 2004, 71). Evaluations shall avoid wasteful public expenditures and optimise the efficiency of public interventions (OECD 2002). While in some countries the evaluation of public programs is deeply rooted in the democratic culture, in others the control of public interventions is still perceived as an annoying task (Toepel und Tissen 2000, 397).
- *efficiency and effectiveness of planning*: The systematic assessment of both the effectiveness and the efficiency is an indispensable prerequisite of any improvements of programmes and policies. Via evaluation activities, it is possible to identify hindrances, errors, inefficiencies, dysfunctions or even corrupt activities and to “produce valid comparisons between programs to decide which should be retained, e.g., in the face of pending budget cuts” (McNamara 1998).
- *learning processes / rational planning*: If the results of evaluations are fed back into the process of policy design, they form an important potential for increasing the rationality of public interventions (Toepel 2000) and inducing “organisational learning” (Fryczewski 2005). Through the evaluation and monitoring of programs, it is possible to collect practical experiences and to qualify strategies, concepts and projects. Process-based evaluations allow for an improvement of ongoing implementation processes and thereby constitute an important steering tool (Becker 2003). Evaluations also facilitate the duplication of effective programs elsewhere (McNamara 1998).

Besides the mentioned general needs of evaluating public interventions, there exist also good reasons related to the very subject of regional governance. The *complexity of regional development* impedes a simple determination of policies’ effects. Only with the help of scientific evaluations some of the cause-effects-chains in regional development – e.g. from infrastructure improvement via increased accessibility to the attraction of businesses and the creation of jobs – can be disentangled and assessed. However, not only the context of regional governance, but also the programs and strategies adopted by regional actors can be classified as complex. The achievement of *partly complementary, partly con-*

flicting objectives contained in regional development concepts cannot be properly assessed without the use of elaborated evaluation techniques. Generally, the *informal and experimental character* of regional steering structures leads to uncertainties: Which degree of institutionalisation is best, which choice of actors appropriate, which objectives realistic, which pitfalls to avoid? These questions can hardly be answered unless a systematic comparison of different alternatives is provided. Finally, there are also normative reasons for analysing the outcomes of regional governance: Are the new arenas of regional governance in line with the principles of democracy and accountability? Do they reduce or foster regional disparities? Whose interests are promoted, whose ones neglected? The potential shortcomings of regional cooperations call for a systematic assessment of both their procedures and impacts.

2 Is it possible to “measure” the impacts of regional governance?

The effects of regional governance approaches can be evaluated in manifold ways. In practice, however, the measurement of goal-attainment and impacts encounters a series of obstacles. In this section, we first summarise different understandings and forms of „evaluation“ (section 2.1). Subsequently, various methodological concerns of goal-based and impact evaluations are discussed, namely conflicting interests of the actors involved in evaluations (section 2.2), unclear objectives (section 2.3), and methodological reservations against both quantitative impact analyses and „soft“ evaluation techniques (sections 2.4 and 2.5). The section is concluded by summarising the main methodological reservations (section 2.6).

2.1 Evaluation: meanings, forms, understandings

Over the last decades, the evaluation of state interventions has constantly increased in importance. Evaluation associations such as the German Evaluation Society (www.degeval.de) have been established in many European Countries. The use of evaluation is widely spread, and so are the different forms and approaches. With Scriven it can be said that “the key sense of the term ‘evaluation’ refers to the process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process” (Scriven 1991, 139). In general, evaluations can be carried out to achieve further knowledge about the object that is evaluated („evaluandum“), to control the stakeholders involved, to foster the dialog between various actors and/or to legitimate the resources used by relating inputs to outputs, outcomes and impacts (Stockmann 2000, 14-16).

Rossi, Freeman and Hofmann (1979) identify three different forms of evaluation in accordance to the main phases of a program or project (preparation, implementation and finalisation/impacts): ex-ante evaluations, formative or „ongoing“ evaluations and summative (or ex-post) evaluations.

- *Ex-ante evaluations* are carried out in the planning stage of an intervention in order to estimate the impacts attainable via the respective measure or program. These evaluations generally verify whether the program design corresponds to the formulated objectives and to which extent the envisaged objectives are realistic. The results of ex-ante evaluations contribute to the further specification of the program design.
- The outset and the ending of a *formative evaluation* are not precisely defined. It accompanies the program from an early stage and can last until the program’s end. Alternative denominations of this evaluation type are „on-going evaluation“ or „process-based evaluation“. A central characteristic of

formative evaluations consists in the (continuous) feedback of evaluation results into the implementation process. Thereby, formative evaluations exert an impact on the program's adaptation and enable the adjustment of objectives and measures. Their main focus is the actual implementation process and the underlying organisational structures. However, the strength of enabling an ongoing program's improvement also represent a weakness of formative evaluations: The object of research alters and that makes it difficult to measure impacts (Kromrey 2001, 118).

- *Summative evaluations* relate the impacts of a program – both intended and non-intended - to the resources used and to the objectives set up in the beginning. They are carried out after the completion of an intervention and - in contrast to formative evaluations – mainly rely on quantitative indicators. Due to their ex-post nature, summative evaluations are not able to improve the implementation of ongoing programs. However, the successes and failures evidenced by ex-post evaluations form an important basis for the further development of programs.

Another, widely agreed classification distinguishes between implementation analysis, impact analysis, goal-based analysis and cost-benefit (or efficiency-)analysis (see e.g. Fleischhauer 2005).

The relevance, use and design of the various evaluation approaches have changed over time. While classical evaluations mainly used quantitative information and „hard“ statistical methods, the use of qualitative methods has become more accepted in recent years. According to Lee (2000), today it is commonly agreed that “good evaluation practice generally involves both quantitative and qualitative inquiry” (p. 144). Still, evaluation is often seen and used as “control of success” by external experts to legitimate the expenditure of public money (e.g. within the European structural funds). However, over the last years a new role of evaluation is emerging: In many recent evaluation approaches, emphasis is put on on-going program improvement rather than mere ex-post evaluations. In some cases, the evaluator evolves to a part of the program or instrument (Diez et al. 2005). Currently, a new trend towards the self evaluation of programs is perceivable (Sucato and Haack 2004).

Despite the long tradition of evaluating state interventions in the EU member states, the most frequently used methods still suffer from substantial methodological shortcomings. The success of evaluations depends to a large extent on the complexity of the respective context and on the selection of the methods best suited to analyse the respective evaluandum. In methodological terms, the evaluation of regional governance structures and processes constitutes a particular challenge. Some of the main methodological concerns are addressed in the following sections.

2.2 Conflicting interests

The evaluation of regional partnerships, networks and strategies seems to constitute an important and desirable task (see section 1.3). In practice, however, evaluators often meet reluctance or even resistance by both their “clients” and “addressees”. Why are evaluations only rarely welcome? Sedlacek (2004) and Bartsch (2004) highlight the intermediate position of evaluation teams between three groups of actors with partly complementary, partly conflicting interests: the clients, the addressees and the scientific community involved in evaluations. First and foremost, the work of evaluators is influenced by their clients. In the German context, the evaluation of regional cooperations is normally commissioned by the respective federal or state ministries responsible for regional planning, urban development, structural or agricultural policies or similar policy fields. In commissioning an evaluation of “their” programs, the clients of evaluations can pursue different objectives. They may simply

want to “verify if the program is really running as originally planned” (McNamara 1998). Besides this control function, the evaluation may also serve other needs, namely the documentation of best practices, the promotion of the program’s objectives, the improvement of a program’s reputation, or the legitimization of the actions chosen.

A second group involved in evaluations is constituted by the “addressees” of programs – in our case municipalities, counties or regional development agencies who are asked to cooperate and to form new institutional structures in order to implement innovative strategies and projects. In the perception of these actors, “evaluation often diverts time and energy from their primary activities”, and risks to evidence “negative outcomes..., which will have negative consequences for the actors who are deemed responsible” (Burgers and Vranken 2004, 71). Consequently, evaluators often meet a “lack of political commitment and resistance among programme managers” (OECD 2002, 2) and an “almost natural reluctance when it comes to evaluating one’s own performance” (Burgers and Vranken 2004, 71). Finally, both the expectations of clients and addressees have to be harmonised with the standards formulated by the scientific community engaged in evaluation research: Does the evaluation design conform to common scientific standards? How reliable are the results? Are the indicators appropriate? And how are problems of cause-effect relations addressed?

The evaluating institution – usually a research institute or a consultancy – finds itself in the unpleasant position of harmonising the various expectations of clients, addressees and scientific community. Besides, it might pursue also own objectives: On the one hand, the work of the evaluators might be guided and limited by the evaluator’s own norms, convictions and preferences. If the evaluating team dislikes a specific programme, it will tend to evidence its failures and errors – and vice versa. On the other hand, the evaluator may pursue simple economic interests: The better the evaluation’s results correspond to the expectations of its client, the more probable it is to obtain future commissions by the same client. Not surprisingly, evaluations commissioned by program designers “let the policy appear in a brighter light than the results of a purely scientifically guided evaluation”, as Mann (2000) has shown in an empirical meta-study on 38 evaluations of structural policies. In the extreme case, evaluation degenerates to a “report to court” (Hübler 2002, 19). To conclude, the harmonisation of the different expectations is only partly feasible. Often, a pragmatic compromise between scientific ambitions and political claims has to be found (Zimmer-Hegmann 2003). As a result, a neutral assessment of a program’s or project’s outcomes is rendered more difficult or even prevented.

2.3 Unclear objectives

The results of programs and projects are to be measured against their objectives. Therefore, a first step of any goal-based evaluation consists in identifying and describing the objectives pursued by a program as a whole or by its constituting projects. Further steps are the operationalisation of the objectives and the definition of complementarities (or trade-offs) between different goals. In the ideal case, the objectives are clearly stated (see table 4).

Table 4: Specification of objectives

Specification	Example
aim specification	The rate of unemployment should <i>be reduced</i> .
change specification	The rate of unemployment should be reduced <i>by three per cent</i> .
period specification	The rate of unemployment should be reduced by three per cent <i>within three years</i> .
effect specification	The rate of <i>long-term</i> unemployment should be reduced by three per cent within three years.

Source: adapted from Burgers and Vranken 2004, 73-74

The specification of targets is necessary “to make an evaluation in the strict sense possible” – otherwise “any result can be interpreted as success (or failure) of the given measure” (Burgers and Vranken 2004, 73-74). For various reasons, however, the objectives of regional networks, partnerships, fora etc. are only rarely stated in a clear way. Traditionally, the goals of regional plans and programs are rather vague and abstract and need further interpretation (Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 388; Sedlacek 2004, 22; Eberhardt et al. 2004, 94; Heintel 2004, 123). The situation is even worse in the field of new regional cooperation and concepts. Due to their informal character, these approaches labelled as regional governance tend to renounce on explicit, concrete objectives. Typical targets found in regional development concepts are a “sustainable regional development”, a “positive impact on the regional economic structure” or an “improved identity of the region”. Obviously, these objectives can hardly be operationalised, let alone quantified.

The open-ended character of regional development concepts can be explained in different ways. On the one hand, the reluctance to formulate objectives may depend on the willingness to maintain “room for manoeuvre” during the implementation process. On the other hand, actors who renounce on targets also prevent critical ex-post evaluations. Often, however, the formulation of vague objectives is also due to political constraints: “They are deliberately formulated in a general, non-committal way to allow for political consensus” (Kühn 2004, 41, translation SP) and constitute “an ‘act of acrobatics’ in order to satisfy different lobbies simultaneously” (Heintel 2004, 123, translation SP). However, even if the objectives of regional networks or concepts are specified in a detailed way, the overall assessment of their achievement represents a methodological challenge, as the single objectives might be inconsistent or at least not weighted. The establishment of a natural protection area might be in line with the objective “improvement of the habitat of species x”, but counteract the objective “creation of new industrial estates”. Which objective is more important? Often the different goal dimensions are not related to each other.

Finally, the open character of objectives can also be interpreted as a necessary prerequisite of a participatory, incremental planning approach. In this view, the flexible formulation and adaptation of objectives constitutes rather a strength than a deficiency of regional development programs, as it allows for the speedy reaction on changing conditions. If for any reasons (e.g. funding criteria, environmental constraints, opposition of tenants/residents, political frictions) a project cannot be implemented in the way originally foreseen, it is flexibly adapted or replaced by another measure. This flexibility is yet achieved at the expense of a coherent strategy. A proper, outcome-based ex-post evaluation of a program’s success is rendered impossible.

2.4 Problems in establishing cause-effect-relations

The vague objectives of (many) regional governance approaches complicate a goal-based analysis (see section 2.3). Alternatively, evaluators can have recourse on impact analyses, defined as “the systematic identification of the effects – positive or negative, intended or not – on individual households, institutions, and the environment caused by a given development activity such as a program or project” (World Bank 2004, 22). The main challenge here consists in isolating the effect attributable to a specific measure or program from other influences:

“The key problem of evaluation in all fields of policy consists in clarifying to which extent the observed effects can be really attributed to a [specific] measure. Strictly speaking, this implies that it is necessary to compare the simulation of a situation with a given measure (ex-post: the real development) and without the same measure (status-quo projection). Only the difference between both situations can be classified as the net effect of a measure.” (Toepel 2000, 400, translation SP).

While such “experimental” evaluations are feasible where the units of analysis are constituted by individuals, they make little sense in the case of regional comparisons. In theory, the identification of a measure’s “net effects” would require the comparison of two identical regions subject to identical influences except for the ones induced by the measure at stake. As this constellation is purely hypothetical, a correct impact analysis is not achievable. Indeed, most so-called “impact analyses” in the field of urban and regional development try to describe the gross effects rather than the net effects evoked by public interventions (Wiechmann and Beier 2004, 389). Besides these general reservations, there are also a series of more pragmatic pitfalls and methodological obstacles complicating the impact analysis of regional governance approaches. Most of them are related to the specific nature of the evaluandum.

- *long-term perspective*: Many projects and measures implemented in the course of regional development strategies aim at long-term effects. New forms of regional cooperation might induce long-term benefits for the participating municipalities, following the assumption that more and better cooperation leads to synergy effects and a more efficient and effective provision of public infrastructure and services, a better marketing of a location and so on. As a rule, it will take years if not decades until these effects come into play and are translated into economic benefits. In practice, however, most ex-post evaluations are carried out few months after the termination of a program or only few years after the establishment of a new cooperation. These evaluations will systematically underestimate the effects of their evaluanda (Toepel 2000, 399; Frankenfeld 1999, 10; Eberhardt et al. 2004, 86).
- *complex realities vs. linear cause-effect-relations*: The “logical framework” approach adopted e.g. for the evaluations of EU structural funds hardly meets the complexity of regional development processes: “In particular the interactions between regional management structures, the involved regional actors and their spheres on the one hand, and the influences external to the region as well as the effect of additional funding schemes on the other hand make it difficult to attribute effects to causes” (Maier 2004, 150, translation SP). The situation is rendered even more complicated by the existence of – intended or non-intended – “side effects”, “multiplier-effects”, “accelerator-effects”, “secondary and tertiary effects” and “windfall gain effects” (Toepel 2000, 399; Maier 2004, 150).

- *low overall impact*: The smaller the respective measure or program is, the more it is difficult to identify its impact on a complex reality. Most programs and initiatives promoting new forms of regional governance are based on rather modest resources. As a consequence, the impact of regional cooperations on aggregated measures such as “GDP per capita” or “employment” will be overlaid by the effects of larger funding programs or external factors. According to Hallet and Untiedt (2001), the macro-effect of a program can only be measured if its resources exceed 3 % of the GDP (Fleischhauer 2005, 50-51). Therefore, econometric models and other forms of macro-analyses will be only partly suited to capture the effects of regional governance (Eberhardt et al. 2004, 86; Toepel 2000, 400).
- *qualitative nature of the effects*: A traditional impact evaluation assumes that effects can be quantified. However, some – maybe even most – of the benefits and drawbacks collated to regional cooperations are qualitative in nature. The generation of mutual trust, learning processes, new identities and new images are classified as key outcomes of regional cooperations, networks and partnerships. None of them can easily be expressed in figures (Kühn 2004, 41ff).
- *lack of time, resources and data*: Apart from methodological considerations, a decisive constraint of impact analyses consists in the fact that they generally are “very expensive and time-consuming” and therefore display a “reduced utility when decision-makers need information quickly” (World Bank 2004, 22). In the context of regional governance, only few resources are devoted to ex-post evaluations (Lichtenberg 2004, 51; Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 387). And even if the resources were available, the identification of effects would encounter the practical problems of data availability: Either data are not available for the required points in time, i.e. the base year of the analysis and the most recent data, or they are not disaggregated spatially.

In the face of their manifold limitations, quantitative impact analyses are only rarely used to assess the outcomes of regional governance approaches. If they are included in the evaluation design, they are usually restricted to implementation analyses measuring the (physical) “outputs” of measures. In some more ambitious cases, impact assessments also include an approximation to quantifiable gross effects attributed to the respective measure, and a verbal description of the underlying cause-effect-chains. The key problem of isolating the net effect of programs and measures is yet unresolved. Therefore, most evaluators fall back on more qualitative methods such as surveys and expert interviews.

2.5 The limits of qualitative methods

The complexity of regional cooperation processes and the qualitative nature of (some of) their outcomes call for the use of “soft” evaluation methods. In order to approach the effects of alternative regional governance models on parameters such as “quality of cooperation”, “location quality” or “economic development”, different tools can be employed, namely surveys, expert interviews, workshops and case studies. Their use seems to be justified “in view of the fact that urban and regional planning is marked by distinctive local and regional particularities, and hence by a large number of variants, but a small number of cases”, although “they suffer from the well-known methodological disadvantage that their results cannot be generalised” (Kühn 2004, 43, translation SP). Each of the mentioned approaches has clear advantages as well as deficiencies:

- *surveys*: A survey among the stakeholders involved in regional cooperations allows for a general assessment of the perceived qualities of the cooperation processes and their outcomes. Potentially, a broad spectrum of stakeholders (e.g. mayors, representatives from political parties, project developers, lobbyists) can be addressed simultaneously. If the survey displays a standardised or semi-standardised design, the assessments can be easily aggregated and compared. Moreover, the same questionnaire can be employed in other regions or points in time. In this way, interregional or temporal comparisons of perceptions and assessments can be undertaken. The typical weaknesses of the survey method consist in generally low response rates and delays in the compilation of the questionnaires. Moreover, the evaluators cannot control by whom a questionnaire is filled in – in the worse case, the mayor might delegate the compilation to a trainee who is hardly involved in the cooperation process. If the response rates are low, the relation of a survey's costs and benefits can be rather critical (Bartsch 2004, 76).

- *expert-interviews*: In-depth interviews with selected representatives from regional cooperations constitute one of the best forms of getting an insight into the success factors and obstacles of cooperations and in understanding their mechanisms and functions. In general, semi-structured or narrative interviews are best suited to extract a maximum of information (Hopf 1991, 177ff). Experts might also provide a – obviously subjective – assessment of the overall success achieved via the respective regional cooperation. The method “expert interviews” has limits both in terms of methodology and contents: Technically, preparing, carrying out, transcribing, documenting, analysing and interpreting interviews is a rather time-consuming task. In the context of regional governance evaluations, the scope of interviews will generally be limited to a rather small number of interviews. Hence, the results of this method highly depend on the “right” selection of the interviewees. In the worst case, the outcomes of expert interviews are simply adopted, and the personal opinion of a few interviewees is generalised and marketed as the evaluators “objective” assessment. In terms of contents, expert interviews might be subject to – conscious or subconscious – bias. The interviewee might be tempted to anticipate the desired answers and to describe rather ideal cases than the actual reality of regional cooperation (Bartsch 2004, 77), or exaggerate the illustration of adverse circumstances for tactical reasons.

- *workshops*: In addition to expert interviews, evaluators can have recourse on expert workshops: The actors involved in a particular theme of regional cooperation (e.g. transport, environment or housing) or in the implementation of a specific project are brought together in order to commonly discuss the context, the success factors, the “bottlenecks” and the outcomes of both institutional structures and individual measures. The key advantage of this method is constituted by the “added value” of the actor's interaction: In recapitulating and discussing selected aspects of regional governance, new arguments might emerge, new views be established and new solutions be generated. Therefore, workshops represent a highly useful method for a formative, process-based evaluation, while they will probably fail to capture the “objective” outcomes of regional governance due to the “internal” perspective of their participants. Similarly to expert interviews, workshops are rather resource intensive, both in their preparation and their implementation, documentation and evaluation. Besides, they are also subject to potential bias through the selection of participants. Finally, the organisation of workshops may fail due to existing tensions and discords among the invited participants. Hence, the application of this method will encounter problems in regions where “bad practices” are to be evaluated.

- *case studies*: While quantitative impact and goal-based evaluations generally aim at capturing the total effects of a given strategy or program, the case study approach is limited to the analysis of selected examples. In the context of regional governance, the evaluators might focus on the analysis of a single cooperation committee instead of the overall cooperation structures, or the analysis of a few projects instead of the totality of projects and measures. While the case study allows for a useful insight into the detailed mechanisms behind the formation of cooperations or the implementation of projects, it fails to provide a general assessment of a regional cooperation's success. A crucial pitfall is constituted by the "right" selection of case studies. Possible criteria for the selection of case studies are: The relevance for the region at stake (measured e.g. by the financial volume), the state of the project (i.e. implementation concluded), and its "representative character" with regard to the total regional governance approach. In practice, the selection will be restricted by data availability and the willingness of the case study actors to assist the evaluation process.

The general pros and cons of the "soft", qualitative evaluation techniques are obvious: On the one hand, they are highly useful for a formative, process-based evaluation, as they are based on an active involvement of the "evaluandum". The recommendations generated in this way will be more practical and relevant, but probably also more accepted than assessments solely based on "external views" and quantitative impact assessments. However, the mentioned methods suffer from the typical problems of qualitative empirical research: The results are only partly representative, they may be biased by tactical response behaviour, and they provide rather perceptions than "hard facts". Moreover, both surveys and interviews, case studies and workshops are highly time consuming. In practice, evaluators of regional governance approaches will frequently lack the resources for applying these methods in an extensive way.

Finally, the necessity to actively involve regional stakeholders implies two further problems: First, all of the qualitative evaluation techniques require a high degree of trust in the integrity of the evaluators and the usefulness of their work. Unless the addressees of the evaluation are not convinced by the function of the evaluation, surveys, interviews and workshops will suffer from low participation rates and biased contributions by the actors involved. Second, the high fluctuation of actors and the rapid institutional changes will render an ex-post evaluation of regional governance structures a challenging task: Some of the most important effects generated by regional cooperations – such as an improved location quality attained via an improved "cooperation climate" – will be perceivable only years after the establishment of a regional network. By then, most of the actors originally involved in the process might have taken on new positions or even left the region. In some cases, even the institutional structures, e.g. a regional development agency, might have vanished. The challenge, then, is to find appropriate interviewees who still remember what went on years ago.

2.6 Conclusion: Shall we renounce on impact assessments?

In the preceding sections, we have evidenced some of the main pros and cons of different ex-post evaluation techniques. The overall question, whether it is feasible to "measure" the effects of regional governance, can be answered only cautiously: "Yes, but only partly". First, evaluators may encounter resistance against their activities. An impact assessment might already fail because of the reluctance of the addressees to contribute relevant information and knowledge. Second, regional networks rarely define their objectives in a precise way. It is hardly feasible – or at least requires a lot of interpretation and guessing – to compare the actual outcomes of regional steering models against any original targets

and goals. Third, even the mere identification of effects often exceeds the methodological and technical capacities of evaluators. Regional governance approaches generate long-term effects in a complex, multi-facet reality marked by the eclipsing of various endogenous and exogenous factors. The impact of “small” regional cooperation programs might hardly appear at all in econometric models, and most of the effects are qualitative in nature anyway. They can only partly be translated into indicators and figures. Finally, qualitative evaluation methods constitute only a partial solution to the problems of “hard” impact assessments. While qualitative techniques are appropriate for a process-based evaluation and allow for a timely feed-back of evaluation results into the actual implementation of cooperations and projects, they only basically allow for an ex-post assessment of impacts. The evaluation outcomes are highly dependent on the contributions of the addressees and may be biased by tactical response behaviour. More seriously, many interviewees might have “vanished” (due to retirement, change of job or out-migration) before the actual effects of regional cooperation processes come into play.

The brief review of methodological concerns and pitfalls confirms that the systematic evaluation of regional governance models is anything but an easy task. Nevertheless, a retreat of scientists, planners and politicians from the arena of ex-post evaluations is surely inappropriate. As evidenced in section 1, the control of public expenditures and the approach of “rational planning” require scientific evaluations of programs and projects. Potentially, there are three possible reactions on the methodological shortcomings of impact assessment techniques: First, an increase of efforts in evaluation research, in order to generate new and better methods of impact evaluation. Second, a combination of different quantitative and qualitative methods in order to achieve more valid results via the “triangulation” of methods (see section 3.3). And third, a stronger emphasis on process-based evaluations instead of ex-post evaluations. In the following, we present some of the few well-documented attempts of evaluating regional governance approaches in Germany in order to show how the various mentioned methodological difficulties are dealt with in practice.

3 Practical evaluation experiences from Germany

Despite various political and methodological obstacles (see section 2), over the last years more and more „regional management initiatives“, „regional development concepts“ or „regional conferences“ in Germany have undergone scientific evaluations. So far, there exist only few publications on the various evaluation efforts. Some examples of evaluations in urban and regional development were gathered in a recent anthology edited by Sedlacek (2004) and a „state-of-the-art“ - article of Wiechmann and Beier (2004). Generally, however, the evaluations are rather scarcely documented, as their outcomes may compromise the actors involved. Another reason is that many evaluations are still underway and have produced few results so far. In the following, we provide a (certainly not complete) overview of evaluations in the field of regional governance (section 3.1) and briefly present four of the best documented examples (sections 3.2-3.5). In carrying out this little „meta-study“, we are mainly interested in finding out which *type* of evaluation is applied (formative vs. summative, process-based vs. ex-post, quantitative vs. qualitative etc.), which *results* have been achieved so far, which *methodological problems* have been encountered, and whether *innovative solutions* to problems inherent to evaluations have been developed.

3.1 Evaluation of regional governance approaches in Germany – state of the art

In the 1970s, Germany experienced a first “wave” of evaluations, taking up impulses from the quickly evolving evaluation sciences in the United States (Toepel 2000, 396). Since 1990, the evaluation of state interventions has experienced a new impetus, mainly fuelled by the consequences of the German reunification: The chronic shortage of public revenues on the one side, the enormous increase of expenditures on the other side have triggered a new interest in the assessment of both the efficiency and the effectiveness of public programs and measures. Since the uptake of the left-wing federal government in 1998, the evaluation of large “model projects” initiated by the federal ministries has evolved to a standard component of many public programs (Toepel und Tissen 2000, 347; Beywl and Taut 2000, 358). Key policy areas subject to evaluations are education, i.e. schools, the health system and various areas of social services.

With some delay, also the fields of regional development and regional governance have been “infected” by the interest in scientific evaluations (Heintel 2004, 130; Strubelt 2004). Especially the European Commission has contributed to the evolution of a new evaluation culture (Toepel 2000, 397; Schwab 2004, 106). Via its funding regulations, the EC has slowly increased the standards concerning the evaluations of its programs and initiatives. Today, all cities and regions benefiting from European structural policies are supposed to carry out a comprehensive ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluation. Subsequently, also some of the state ministries in charge of regional cooperation programs have started to commission evaluations (Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 391). Compared to other countries, however, Germany still seems to have a lot to catch up, as “the systematic evaluation of programs, measures and projects is still an exception” (Becker 2003, 216, translation SP). This critical assessment seems to apply also to the field of regional governance, as “systematic evaluations of regional development planning (...) have not been carried out in Germany so far” (Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 388, translation SP). Today, however, the evaluation of regional steering models represents “the dictates of the moment” (Heintel 2004, 130). Some of the recent evaluation attempts are presented in the following.

3.2 Example 1: City-Hinterland-Concepts in Schleswig-Holstein

The state of Schleswig-Holstein in the very north of Germany is marked by extremely small-scaled municipalities, rendering the coordination of planning activities a challenging task. In order to overcome the fragmented administrative structures, the state department of regional planning has fostered the establishment of „city-hinterland-concepts“ since the early 1990s. These cooperations usually comprise a medium-sized city and its adjacent jurisdictions. Up to now, 13 cities and their hinterland have joined in so-called „territorial development plans“. These city-hinterland-concepts and the underlying cooperation structures represent a typical case of regional governance (although restricted to public actors): They explicitly aim at establishing an intermediate steering-level in between the small-scale municipalities and the superior level of state and regional planning in order to tackle the challenge of a (more) coordinated settlement development. The cooperation is contractually fixed, but occurs on a voluntary basis (Diller 2004).

In 2003, the responsible state department commissioned an evaluation of the city-hinterland-cooperations in Schleswig-Holstein. The evaluation took 11 months (01.-11.2003) and addressed the

question „to which extent the city-hinterland concepts contribute to a cooperative development of the cities and their hinterland in line with the goals formulated by the state, and in which ways the instrument can be further improved“ (Diller 2004, 3). According to this statement, the evaluation belongs to the category of goal-based program evaluations. Its approach was mainly qualitative and consisted of four steps:

- expert interviews with various representatives of the state government,
- a comprehensive analysis of the plans and documents,
- additional in-depth interviews with selected representatives from different counties, cities, and suburban municipalities, and
- a systematic comparison of the targets formulated in the (informal) city-hinterland-plans with the binding regulations of the (formal) land-use plans which were drawn on the basis of the concepts.

According to the evaluator, the methodology had at least three major methodological limitations: First, the impacts could only partly be measured as most of the city-hinterland-concepts formulated goals to be accomplished in the year 2010. Therefore, the evaluation only includes „third-term“ or „mid-term“ effects. Second, the assessment of the cooperations' processes and outcomes mainly relies on the subjective assessment of experts, whose statements refer to events and decisions which occurred years ago. Third, most of the interviewees were directly involved in the cooperations and tend to assess this instrument more positively than other representatives of politics and administration would do (Diller 2004, 4).

In his final report, the evaluator draws mainly positive conclusions. He classifies city-hinterland-concepts as „an effective instrument of inter-municipal coordination and of the implementation of the goals formulated by the state planning department; the cost-benefit-relation is in line with the claim of increasing the efficiency of public administration“ (Diller 2004, 40, translation SP). The report provides a detailed overview of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the 13 cases and draws a set of conclusions on the further development of the program (e.g. the future role the state department, the need of establishing further city-hinterland-cooperation etc.).

The evaluation of the city-hinterland-concepts in Schleswig-Holstein is remarkable in different regards: It combines quantitative and qualitative assessments, takes into consideration both outcomes and organisational structures, and adopts a transparent style: The results of the evaluation are well documented, published and disseminated via the state department's website. A particular achievement consists in the „translation“ of the evaluation's results into concrete recommendations for the further fine-tuning of the program. It might be doubted, however, whether a more quantitative analysis – not feasible at the moment of the evaluation – and the systematic inclusion of „opponents“ to city-hinterland-cooperations in the sample of interviewees would have lead to less positive assessments. In view of the potentially conflicting interests between evaluators and their clients (see section 2.3), it is interesting to note that the evaluation has been carried out by the responsible state department itself. If the methodology and the results were less well reported, the suspicion could arise that the results were biased as the evaluation was not commissioned externally.

3.3 Example 2: Regional Development Concepts in Thuringia

Since 1994, the state Thuringia supports its municipalities in working out regional development concepts (RDC). Over the last 10 years, 40 subregions in Thuringia have taken advantage of this offer and taken on the elaboration of RDCs. Compared to RDCs developed in other German *Länder*, the RDCs established in Thuringia are extremely small in size: As a rule, the regional cooperations comprise only few municipalities and between 20,000 and 70,000 inhabitants. Six of the Thuringian RDCs extend beyond the state borders and can be categorized as cross-boarder cooperations (<http://www.rolp.thueringen.de>, Usbeck 2002).

In 1997, the state department of economic affairs and infrastructure commissioned a first analysis of the RDCs developed so far (Schmigalla 1997), which led to “a synoptic report rather than an evaluation” (Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 391, translation SP). Four years later, the state office charged the Department of Economic Geography and Regional Development at the University of Jena with the exemplary evaluation of four RDCs. The evaluation took 9 months (01.-09.2001) and included both examples of ongoing and concluded RDCs. It aimed at controlling the implementation of the concepts, analysing their impacts, verifying the attainment of goals and testing the efficiency of the intervention. The methodology comprised an analysis of documents, a survey, interviews and statistical, quantitative analyses (Bartsch 2004, 73ff). The results of the evaluation reported by Bartsch (2004) evidence various shortcomings of the RDC-approach in Thuringia: The delineation of the cooperation areas is deemed too small, which is also mirrored by the implementation of small-scale projects exerting few impacts on regional development. Moreover, the analytical basis of the RDCs is assessed as too detailed, while the list of projects included in the RDCs is too long, preventing a concentration on relevant measures. The evaluators therefore recommend to form larger regional cooperations and to concentrate on less, but larger projects in the future (Bartsch 2004, 79).

In the course of the evaluation, the team of the University of Jena encountered a series of methodological problems and “incalculable difficulties”: The state departments only slowly provided the documents needed for the analysis; the survey suffered from low response rates (<20%) and long response times – its results could only partly be used for the evaluation; the planned group discussion had to be replaced by individual interviews as potential participants were reluctant to participate; the statistical analyses missed spatially disaggregated data and had to be carried out at the level counties instead of municipalities (Bartsch 2004, 72 ff). Overall, the evaluation of the Thuringian RDCs illustrates the various methodological challenges which (ex-post)-evaluators need to tackle in the field of regional governance (see section 2). Maybe, some of the problems could be avoided by commissioning a process-based, ongoing evaluation instead of a “quick shot” over nine months. Namely the qualitative methods would probably attain better results if the evaluators had the time to build up trustful relations to their “evaluandum” and were perceived as support rather than control.

Despite the difficulties met, the evaluation design chosen for the RDCs in Thuringia is exemplary in at least two ways: First, it proved to be flexible. In the course of the evaluation, it has been adapted twice, rendering possible the production of useful recommendations within only 9 months time. Second, the team from Jena systematically applied a “triangulation”-approach in order to validate the evaluation’s results: By involving several scientists in the evaluation process, the risk of bias due to an evaluator’s subjective perception was reduced. The parallel use of complementary methods allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the RDCs. Finally, the discussion of the results in regional workshops further increased the validity of the obtained results.

3.4 Example 3: Regional Development Concepts in Saxony

Over the last 10 years, a new level of regional governance has emerged in the *Land* Saxony. In order to promote voluntary regional cooperations, the state government of Saxony financially assists its municipalities in developing regional development strategies. Since 1997, 22 so-called “action areas for measures of regional development” have been defined. They include both urban growth poles and backward rural regions marked by a weak economic structure. The “action areas” receive state funding from the FR Regio-program in order to develop regional development concepts (RDC).

So far, only one out of the 22 regional cooperations was subject to an evaluation: the “economic region Chemnitz-Zwickau”. Interestingly, the idea to carry out an evaluation was raised by the region itself. The actors involved in the cooperation were interested in obtaining a neutral external assessment of their efforts and to identify possible weaknesses in the implementation of measures. The evaluation, commissioned in the year 2000, was done by a private consultancy. It focussed on the assessment of the cooperation’s start phase and pursued the goal to “raise information on project results, to identify problems of cooperation and implementation, and to further develop the existing project ideas”. The evaluators certified the region to have made “a clear step in the right direction” (Wiechmann und Beier 2004, 392, translation SP).

Recently, the state government of Saxony decided to systematically evaluate all of the 22 regional cooperations supported by its department of regional planning. The planned evaluation has a threefold objective: “First, to gather detailed information on the use of the instrument RDC in Saxon regions, second, to use this information to improve the FR Regio-program, and third, to support the regional actors in the implementation phase” (Wiechmann and Beier 2004b, 3, translation SP). According to this description, the evaluation can be classified as both a mid-term program evaluation and a formative, process-based evaluation at the level of the individual regions. In order to prepare the evaluation, the research institute IÖR in Dresden was charged with developing an evaluation design. The institute was asked to generate a list of criteria and indicators to be used for answering the key question under which circumstances RDCs are successful. In order to choose an appropriate evaluation design, IÖR carried out a comprehensive “pre-evaluation”: The evaluators gathered evaluation experiences from similar programs in other *Länder*, carried out four regional case studies based on document analyses and telephone interviews, organised a workshop and carried out a survey among the 22 “action areas”. The proposed evaluation design distinguishes four evaluanda: the RDC-document itself, the cooperation process, the outcomes of the RDCs and the “perception and use” of the cooperation capacities acquired through RDC-cooperations. The evaluators propose 120 quantitative and qualitative indicators for assessing the four dimensions to be addressed in the evaluation. These indicators comprise elements of an implementation control, an impact assessment, a goal-based evaluation and a cost-benefit-analysis. The collection of the underlying information shall be based on document analyses and interviews with “a few, selected key actors”, possibly supplemented by a survey and modules of self-evaluation (Wiechmann and Beier 2004b).

The practical value of the evaluation design proposed by IÖR cannot be assessed yet, as it has only partly been implemented so far. Already by now, however, the procedure of developing the evaluation design can be assessed as exemplary. Other than in many other cases, the evaluators invested both time and financial resources to elaborate a coherent evaluation approach tailored to the needs of both their clients and addressees. Through preparatory surveys and workshops, the actors subject to the future evaluation could influence the indicators and the methods to be applied. It is to expect that the

evaluations' results will be accepted and translated more willingly than in many other cases of evaluations on regional governance.

3.5 Example 4: The REGIONALEN in North Rhine-Westphalia

The REGIONALEN in North Rhine-Westphalia represent a particular model of regional cooperation. The regions participating in the REGIONALEN-program are identified via a competition: Municipalities gather, develop innovative project ideas and apply for funding. Only the best models are granted state subsidies. The main objective of the REGIONALEN is to sharpen the regional profile and thereby improve both the regional identity and the external image of the region. In this way, the regions shall gain in attractiveness as places to live and work in the long run. A further special feature of the program consists in its clearly defined duration: Each region has a few years time to develop project ideas and to implement them. In the final year of a REGIONALE, the various projects and activities – ranking from urban and landscape development to economic promotion and education – are presented to the public. Since 1997, six regions have been included in the REGIONALE-program.

A first mid-term evaluation of the REGIONALEN was commissioned in 2000 by the North Rhine-Westphalian state department (MSWKS) in charge of the program. From the beginning, the evaluators emphasized that the novelty of the approach “does not allow for an evaluation in the sense of an analysis assessing the structural and economic impacts of the instrument” (Scheuven und Wachten 2001, 8, translation SP). However, the chosen methodology rendered possible a “critical interim balance” and evidenced a series of the program’s potentials of improvement, namely the concentration on smaller areas and less, but larger projects. Three years later, the responsible state department MSWKS commissioned a second evaluation. The state research institute ILS NRW was awarded the task to develop an evaluation design and take on the task of an “accompanying research” on the program. In cooperation with both the clients (MSWKS) and the addressees (the REGIONALEN), we defined a series of evaluation modules, comprising among others an inventory of the current state of implementation, the compilation of a project database, two detailed case studies per region and the organisation of strategy workshops. Moreover, our evaluation team was asked to organise a congress in order to present the instrument REGIONALE to a broad public, and to compile a publication on some of the “best practices” achieved so far. The variety of methods and tasks indicates the manifold objectives pursued by the evaluation. Its main task consists in a formative, process-based evaluation assisting the regional cooperations in the implementation of their strategies and projects. Particular emphasis is laid on the objectives and strategies of the REGIONALEN: The evaluation team seeks to assist the regional actors in developing coherent and operationalisable targets. In parallel, the evaluation carries out an implementation analysis and an interim assessment of the impacts achieved so far. Finally, via the congress and a publication we also took on the task to “promote” the REGIONALEN program.

A peculiarity of the REGIONALEN-evaluation consists in the different stages of implementation of the three REGIONALEN: While the REGIONALE 2006 has already implemented a large number of projects, the REGIONALEN 2008 and 2010 are still in the process of defining strategies and projects. Moreover, the three regions differ considerably in size and structure; consequently, a systematic comparison of processes and outcome cannot be attained. A further challenge might arise from the far-reaching eclipsing of different functions taken on by our evaluation team: On the one hand, ILS NRW

aims at assisting the regional actors in the implementation of the cooperation. This is one of the reasons why – other than in most other evaluations of regional governance – the REGIONALEN-evaluation is conceived as a continuous task, accompanying the process over several years. On the other hand, the state owned institute is charged with assessing (some of) the program’s outcomes in order to contribute to the optimization of the REGIONALEN-program in the long run. This “double function” is in a way typical of process-based evaluations whose results are constantly fed back into the evaluation process. It requires a clear definition and communication of the evaluations’ objectives and of the evaluators’ role. A strength of the REGIONALEN-evaluation approach is, in our view, constituted by its flexibility and its process-based orientation: Although several modules were formulated in the beginning of the evaluation process, the concrete tasks of the evaluators are defined step-wise in cooperation with the responsible state department and the regional actors.

3.6 Synopsis of the practical evaluation experiences

The four evaluation examples – city-hinterland-cooperations in Schleswig-Holstein, regional development concepts in Thuringia and Saxony and the REGIONALEN in North Rhine-Westphalia - provide an insight into the state-of-the-art of evaluation practices in German regions (see table 5).

Table 5: Synopsis of four evaluation examples

example	functions	methods	specialities
City-Hinterland-Cooperations (Schleswig-Holstein, 2003)	goal-based program evaluation / mid-term-assessment; cost-benefit-analysis (efficiency)	document analyses, expert interviews, statistical analyses	open dissemination of the assessments’ results; evaluation carried out by the responsible state department itself
Regional Development Concepts (Thuringia, 2001)	program evaluation, comprising implementation control, impact analyses, goal-based evaluation, cost-benefit-analysis (efficiency)	document analyses, survey, expert interviews, statistical analyses, workshop	flexible adaptation of methods; “triangulation of methods”, exemplary validation of results
Regional Development Concepts (Saxony, 2004-2005)	program evaluation, implementation control, cost-benefit-analyses (efficiency)	document analyses, expert interviews, possibly also surveys	extensive „pre-evaluation“ participatory development of the evaluation design
REGIONALEN (North Rhine-Westphalia, 2004-)	process-based, formative evaluation, comprising implementation control, goal-based evaluations and mid-term impact assessments; in the long run: program evaluation	document analyses, expert interviews, surveys, workshops, case studies	dialog-oriented evaluation, step-wise development of evaluation design, evaluation as continuous task and part of the program

Source: own compilation

The synopsis of the four examples confirms the trend towards formative evaluations as described in the evaluation literature. All of the examples focus on ongoing cooperation processes rather than an ex-post evaluation of impacts. In all cases, a main objective of the evaluation consists in the optimisation of both ongoing cooperation processes and the underlying program supporting the establishment of regional plans and activities. It is notable that the evaluation is generally charged and financed by the responsible state departments rather than the regional cooperations themselves. Apparently, the benefits of a process-based evaluation have so far only partly been acknowledged by actors involved

in regional cooperations. A further commonality is the application of predominantly qualitative, descriptive methods. In view of the various problems related to the establishment of cause-effect-relations in the complex reality of regional development (see section 2.4), the concentration on qualitative evaluation techniques constitutes a necessary choice. However, none of the evaluation designs at stake renounce on at least some attempts to quantify the impacts of the observed regional governance models.

Besides the many similarities, there are also some interesting differences between the four approaches. First and foremost, the evaluations have different time horizons: While e.g. the analysis of the city-hinterland-concepts in Schleswig-Holstein was restricted to a few months, the evaluation of the REGIONALEN is conceived as an ongoing task and hence as a part of the program. Second, the evaluations employ different methods, according to their main functions and the available resources. For example, the evaluation of the RDCs in Saxony is predominantly based on expert interviews and document analyses, in Thuringia surveys and workshops were included in the design. A third difference refers to the degree of flexibility in the evaluation design. The approach chosen by IÖR for evaluating the RDCs in Saxony is a model of an extensive “pre-evaluation”, leading to a well-defined list of indicators and a clearly structured research design. By contrast, the evaluation of the REGIONALEN is deliberately based on an “incremental strategy”: The various tasks of the evaluation are mainly defined during the process. Which of the two approaches is preferable depends on the function of the evaluation and the characteristics of the respective governance process. In general, we assume that a process-based evaluation benefits from a flexible, incrementally defined design.

4 Conclusions

Regional governance constitutes a multi-facet phenomenon. The various models of regional cooperations, networks, alliances and partnerships labelled as “regional governance” vary considerably from region to region (see section 1.2). They differ with regard to the number and types of actors involved, the issues tackled and the degree of institutionalisation, among others. As shown above, so far there is not even a consensus on what exactly “regional governance” is (see section 1.1). It is hence difficult to formulate general recommendations for the evaluation of regional governance models. However, both the literature review (section 2) and the brief illustration of four recent evaluation experiences in German regions (section 3) revealed some hints on “how to evaluate regional governance” which might be worth to be put for discussion:

- *focus on qualitative evaluation techniques*: Many of the effects exerted by regional cooperations are qualitative in nature and come into play only years after the start of the cooperative efforts. Examples are the improvement of the “cooperation climate”, the identity or the image of an area. Besides, the overall impact of programs fostering regional governance structures is relatively modest compared to “hard” interventions in the fields of infrastructure, transport or agriculture (see section 2.4). Therefore, “soft” techniques such as interviews, surveys and workshops based on the subjective perception of stakeholders seem to be – in general – more promising than classical quantitative methods such as econometric models. However, due to various deficiencies inherent to qualitative methods (see section 2.5) and the need of validation, a “triangulation of methods” is recommendable.

- *triangulation of methods*: The parallel application of different (quantitative and qualitative) methods allows for a comprehensive assessment of success factors, hindrances and impacts of regional governance processes. Each of the methods available so far has clear limitations (see section 2). While an evaluation mainly based on expert interviews might be biased by the selection of interviewees (example: core-hinterland-concepts in Schleswig-Holstein), the successful application of statistical data is highly dependent on the availability of appropriate statistical data (example: RDCs in Thuringia). By providing a “triangulation of methods” as proposed in the Thuringian example, the risk of subjective bias is minimised, while the validity of the results is clearly increased. A limitation of this method consists in its resource intensity: For financial reasons, most evaluations will be forced to restrict on one or few methods.
- *free choice of the methods*: The clients of evaluations tend to suggest or even impose specific methods of evaluation, e.g. cost-benefit-analyses, workshops or statistical analyses. In the extreme case, the complete evaluation design including a list of indicators is provided by the client – as in the case of the EU structural funds evaluations. While this approach facilitates the comparison of outcomes between different “cases” (here: regions), it fails to acknowledge the specificities of the evaluandum. In the context of regional governance, the selection of methods should consider the specific case and occur as a collective process involving clients, addressees and evaluators.
- *participatory development of the evaluation design*: The earlier the addressees of evaluations are integrated into the evaluation process, the easier is the compilation of relevant information and the later translation of the evaluation results into action. Examples such as the evaluation of RDCs in Saxony show that it is worth involving the actors at an early stage by carrying out surveys and organising workshops.
- *incremental strategy*: The design of formative evaluations does not need to be clarified in every detail in advance. The dynamic character of governance processes requires a flexible adaptation of methods to the specific conditions encountered in the regions. An incremental strategy “abandons the idea of a strictly defined set of criteria at the outset of the program and focuses on an incremental evaluation, which becomes more precise ‘under way’ “ (Burgers and Vranken 2004, 75). Examples such as the evaluation of the REGIONALEN and the RDCs in Thuringia evidence the strengths of this approach.
- *focus on learning processes and formative evaluations*: Previous evaluations of state interventions often concentrated on ex-post impact assessments. In the field of regional governance, a focus on formative, process-based evaluations reveals as more promising. On the one hand, a mere assessment of impacts is hardly feasible in the context of regional development, due to time lags, eclipsing influences and the qualitative nature of changes. On the other hand, a process-based evaluation increases the opportunity to influence the ongoing implementation of projects and to improve the establishment of institutional structures. The growing focus on learning processes can be classified as a shift from a “logical framework”-evaluation to a systemic evaluation approach (Heintel 2004, 125).
- *communication of evaluation results*: Formative, process-based evaluations require a communication style: The addressees’ cooperation in the evaluation process is best if both the objectives and the results of the evaluation are communicated in an open way and validated in group discussions. A model is provided by the example of the city-hinterland-cooperations in Schleswig-Holstein,

where a detailed report of the evaluation results is even available via the department's website, or in the Thuringian case where the outcomes of the evaluation were exposed to a group discussion, following the "convergence model" of triangulation.

- *discursive reconstruction of objectives*: One of the main problems envisaged in the course of evaluating regional governance structures consists in the vague, partly even conflicting objectives. In addition, the goals and targets are generally subject to frequent reformulations. Under these circumstances, a classical goal-based evaluation is hardly attainable. Instead, evaluators should adopt the task of "discursively reconstructing the definition of targets and put them for discussion" (Schwab 2004, 103). In the era of incremental (regional) planning, the formulation of objectives seems to be rather an ongoing process than a prerequisite of state interventions and actions. Obviously, a minimum of "strategy" is yet needed to act in a rational way. Hence, the "discursive reconstruction" of binding, but nevertheless flexible strategies represents one of the key tasks of future process-based evaluations. The "strategy workshops" foreseen in the concept of the REGIONALEN-evaluation illustrate a method to accomplish this task.
- *evaluation as an integral part of the program implementation*: Many evaluations suffer from their short-term-mission character: Within few months, actors external to the process need to collect data, carry out surveys and interviews, validate the findings and formulate sensible recommendations. While this approach might be feasible in some cases, it will meet serious obstacles (e.g. mistrust, lack of participation) in others (example: RDCs Thuringia). The establishment of a trustful relation constitutes one of the crucial prerequisites of formative evaluations (Sedlacek 2004, 23). Therefore, the conception of evaluations as integral part of regional cooperation processes seems to constitute an ideal case of formative evaluations (example: REGIONALEN).

So far, there has been only few exchange between different evaluation teams and researchers involved in the evaluation of regional governance models and programs. The German Evaluation Society (Degeval) has undertaken some first steps to stimulate the exchange between both practitioners and scientists. The discussion of experiences and recommendations for a "good" evaluation of regional governance processes constitutes an important future task of evaluation research.

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