Knowledge – Source and product of rural learning processes

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Abstract: *Knowledge – as placed at "centre stage" by management theories, politics and economics – also increases in importance for the development of rural areas as it is the basis for innovation and creativity. In terms of "knowledge follows tasks in the sense of providing specific solutions for particular regional problems and situations learning processes are decisive to attain this profound knowledge. This paper focuses on two particular study-areas in Austria to verify the essential role of formal, informal and collective learning processes. An innovative region is dependent on the encouragement of its human resource through the stimulation of individual and collective learning process on the local as well as regional level. According to this the new information and communication technology offers a considerable potential not yet appreciated. Hence the main focus lies on the questions how formal, informal and collective learning processes can be initiated and which instruments are essential to promote a prosperous rural development.*

Keywords: *regional knowledge basis, formal, informal, collective learning*

Introduction

The learning ability of the region enhances their strengths and competitiveness (Scheff, 1999) and represents a strategic resource in coping with the structural change in rural areas (Holzinger, 1998). The "Learning Region" was one of the first attempts to learning, as a process empowering the regional population also termed "human resource", the regional economy and not at least the social and cultural autonomy. Although the "Learning region" evolved in the 1990s it gained interest as a comprehensive regional development strategy not until the current programming period from 2007-2013. For this program period the European Union – due to the Lisbon agenda – aims to become the most competitive, regional knowledge basis in the world. With this target the European Union admits to a clear innovation policy that is based on two elements: (a) the funding of the human resource by means of education, further education and lifelong learning and (b) the support of a knowledge-based, innovation-oriented economy.

Knowledge originates through the conversion and integration of information, also defined as learning. Existing knowledge serves as anchor to incorporate new information and to link it to new knowledge (Haun, 2002). There is not *the* overall learning process, but a distinction between: *formal*, *informal* and *collective* learning processes which establish the regional knowledge basis. In this regard the regional knowledge basis (also see chapter 2) is some kind of framework, subsuming the elements and instruments that have to be taken into account when encouraging and implementing learning process on the regional level.

Due to this the paper focuses on the questions (a) how formal, informal and collective processes can be initiated on the local as well as regional level and (b) which instruments are essential to promote them.

At first the paper gives some insights into the "model of the regional knowledge basis" introduced by Holzinger (1998) that served as guideline for the analysis of the two case studies. The next chapter analyses the two case studies "KB5" and "Steirisches Vulkanland". In order to prevent premature generalization both case studies are examined separately towards their contributions to implement learning activities and the instruments applied. The last chapter "analysis and synthesis" compares the outcomes from the local process "KB5" with the regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" and summarizes the main statements.

The regional knowledge basis

The attraction of *knowledge* for regional development substantiates in facts that (a) it is the pre-condition and basis for innovation and creativity, (b) it is a location factor with internal and external impact and (c) it enhances the quality of labour and the labour market (Fromholdt-Eisebith, 2006). Knowledge originates through the conversion and integration of information, also defined as learning (Haun, 2002).

The "regional knowledge basis" is established through formal, informal and collective learning processes and consists of different features, which range from infrastructure (education centres, ICT etc.) to common language, regional culture etc. Due to Holzinger (1998) the regional knowledge base shows following characteristics: (a) it is not static, but process-driven (b) it is culturally-based, deeply rooted in the local culture and local values, (c) knowledge takes many forms and has many levels: some knowledge has been highly formalized and institutionalized, while others are of more informal or tacit natures, (d) knowledge is not the final product, but the key point of departure for an ongoing process, (e) it has a systemic nature, involving different elements on the regional context. Considering these characteristics, the "regional knowledge basis" consists of three elements (see figure 1): (1) the "knowledge elements", (2) the "knowledge activities" and (3) the "knowledge principles".
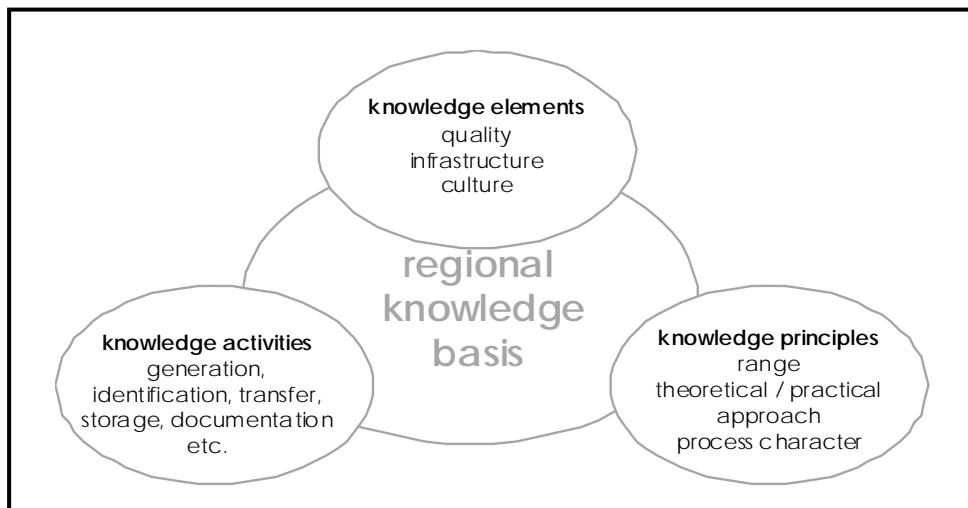

Figure 1. The regional knowledge basis (Holzinger, 1998).

The "knowledge elements" are divided into three sections: (a) the knowledge quality, (b) the (knowledge-based) infrastructure and (c) the knowledge culture. The term (a) "knowledge quality" represents the "software" and comprises the skills, abilities and knowhow of regional persons, organisations and institutions. Also the different types of knowledge and the role of implicit and explicit knowledge refer to this element. The (knowledge-based) infrastructure (b) is not reduced to information and communication technology only, but rather multifarious. It implies all kinds of institutions, organisations and structures that inspire knowledge activities. The most known are formal educational institutions (schools, universities, polytechnics etc.) or further facilities such as libraries, museums etc. Considering the form of institutionalization (formal or informal), the learning content (specialized or interdisciplinary) or the legal form (private or public) a various number of additional institutions can be added: innovation centres, regional management, education centres, business incubators, associations etc. Table 1 gives an overview of the infrastructure the criteria used to differentiate the instruments used to initiate and transact learning processes.

Table 1. Categories of the knowledge infrastructure (Holzinger, 1998).

category	characteristics	
form	material	immaterial
	(eg. innovation centre)	(eg. co-operation)
institutionalization	formal	informal
	(eg. university)	(eg. event, workshop)
learning content	specialized, related to the working field	further education, interdisciplinary, not related to the working field
legal form	private	public
target	profit- oriented	non profit oriented

The "knowledge culture" (c) implies on the one hand the financial support for the establishment and preservation of the knowledge infrastructure and on the other hand the intangible awareness and appreciation of the politicians. "Knowledge culture" implies also the personal approach to knowledge in the sense of the personal openness and willingness for further education and lifelong learning.

(2) The "knowledge activities" refer to all components due to the "management" of knowledge: (a) gathering, generating, (b) storing, (c) sharing and (d) applying of knowledge. Haun (2002) defines three possibilities to (a) gather knowledge: to discover and take advantage of the available resources of knowledge, to develop new knowledge or to procure knowledge from external sources. Knowledge can be stored (b) in individuals or communities. In the case of explicit / codified knowledge also the storage via databases is a reliable and long-term possibility to store knowledge. At least Haun (2002) defines also a "cultural store": traditions, values and principles of a region or an organization / institution store their specific unique knowledge through visions and ritual acts. Knowledge is shared (c) through communication. The most common way is through education and further education, where explicit knowledge is taught and discussed. To share implicit, personal knowledge some predictions have to be fulfilled: the transmitter and recipient need a foundation of trust, a common language and an occasion in the sense of a bilateral benefit. The last step of the knowledge-management cycle represents the application of knowledge: according to Altmeyer (2002) communication, acts and decisions are the three possibilities to utilize knowledge.

For completeness reasons – although not essential for the further content of the paper – also the third element of the "regional knowledge basis", the "knowledge principles" (3) are discussed. The "knowledge principles" include the range of the regional knowledge basis (thematic and spatial), the dimensions of theory and practice as well as the systemic and process-driven elements.

Summarizing these remarks, the "regional knowledge basis" is a set of conditions supporting and enabling various regional learning processes. Due to the key questions of the paper (a) how formal, informal and collective learning processes can be initiated and (b) which instruments are essential the further investigations will focus on the elements "Knowledge activities" and "knowledge culture".

Empirical investigations

The case studies are the formal regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" and the informal local "knowledge and education centre KB5" both located within the province of Styria. The following reasons justify the selection of the case studies: (1) both emphasize the high significance of the factor "knowledge" and the "learning process", (2) both show basic approaches in the establishment of a knowledge-based infrastructure, (3) both are convinced of the ongoing social transformation processes and a conscious focus on it, (4) both are located within the province of Styria and hence show comparable circumstances regarding political, administrative and natural frameworks. Simultaneously they differ within two features: (a) the spatial level: regional (Steirisches Vulkandland) and local (KB5) and (b) their approach, characterized as formal (Steirisches Vulkanland) and informal (KB5). "Formal" and "informal" stress the form of institutionalization, the kind of knowledge and expertise contributed by the involved stakeholders, the undertaken activities and the methods and instruments used. According to this "formal" stresses the main actors and their activities which target directly onto the regional development process. Their activities are

institutionalized and the subjects taken up are consciously embedded in the regional context. In contrast to this the "informal" approach includes actors that do not aim directly and consciously to the regional development through their activities, but have an indirect impact on it. They influence the regional development without focusing it in particular (Walser, 2006). They operate own-initiative an autonomous.

The selection of a regional and formal as well as a local and informal case-study is based on the conviction, that regional development process are neither just "top down" nor "bottom up" initiated and performed, but a interaction of both. Due to this also the influences on (formal, informal and collective) learning processes differentiate.

The "knowledge and education centre KB5", Styria

Origin

The "knowledge and education centre KB5" is located in Kirchbach in der Steiermark in the East Styrian hills, 27km from the main capital Graz. The municipal Kirchbach is a centre for the surrounding area and settlements due to its good supply with daily infrastructure (shopping facilities, schools and a parish). The economic structure is affected by agriculture and forestry but also small and medium enterprises.

A key moment for the initiation of the "knowledge and education centre KB5" (KB5) was the year 2002, when the abandoned court-house was for sale. After numerous failed attempts to sell it – the reason was the peripheral location of it – a group of five men (the five actors of the KB5 process) decided to purchase it. Different driving forces were determining: (1) they noticed the ongoing resignation within the municipal since the closing of the court-house and intended to counteract this development via a revitalization and revaluation of the building; (2) they wanted to break down established structures and originate something new and innovative, and not at least they wanted to (3) "leave marks". In contrast to other interested purchasers, the five actors defined the peripheral location of the building as a potential and chance. According to them, the building has a reasonable distance to the next urban area: on the one hand it is near enough to benefit from certain urban infrastructures on the other hand its far enough to establish a own identity not being at risk from getting received by the city. The KB5 building (KB for "Kirchbach", "5" for the five actors) has five floors with a floor space of 1200m². The first three floors are used for the enterprises of the five actors (an insurance broker, a designer, two IT companies and a lawyer). One floor provides seminar- and training rooms and the upper floor guest rooms. In the basement gastronomy was set up as to fulfil the demand of an integrated concept. The actors had the vision to establish a centre for "culture, communication, learning and business". From the beginning on they focused on "education and learning" and aim to establish "a university in the rural area" with emphasize on the instrument "information and communication technology." The five actors are convinced that the development of a regional knowledge basis requires "hardware" in the sense of a supply with ICT to overcome the lack of information. An appropriate supply with ICT – and the possibilities along with it – can make the rural area an attractive place to live and work for a broader range of lifestyles. Their vision is a "global village", which is defined as a village that combines two aspects: the world of the urban know-how and techniques and the world of the rural quality of life (Nahrada, 2006).

Doing so, the five actors set up an association with following aims: (1) enhancement of communication and learning processes in their rural region using information technologies (2) support of the establishment of the "global village", (3) establishment of an "open source" culture and a Linux-academy within the premises of the KB5 building, (4) assistance in the elaboration of an educational network, (5) encouragement of innovation through learning processes, knowledge exchange and the use of ICT. To analyze the impact of this local informal process on the establishment of a "regional knowledge basis" the model of Holzinger (1998) is taken as a basis. The following remarks focus on (1) the undertaken activities addressing formal, informal and collective learning processes and (2) the applied instruments.

Knowledge activities

Due to the topic of the workshop "the future of distance learning in rural areas" specific attention should be paid to the element "knowledge activities", especially activities initiating and enhancing learning processes. The primary concern of the informal KB5 process is the enhancement of individual development through informal and formal learning processes. *Formal learning* represents the former course of education. Furthermore it implies also further education within an organized context, offered by a specific institution and completed with a certified degree. In the majority of cases formal learning process are undergone to enhance and extend the skills and knowhow useful for the occupation or job career. *Informal learning* includes learning processes without a certified degree, without curricula or specified educational institutions. Informal learning is an everyday activity, consisting of experiences and interaction with the environment through discourses and actions. Informal learning is controlled by the learner themselves focusing on personal interests and the personal willingness to learn. Consequently knowledge gathered through informal learning processes shows a high degree of application, due to the personal aims and benefits (Walser, 2006)

Both learning types are supported through a variety of activities which will be described more precisely.

The first in a chain of events was and still is the "*Montagsakademie*" (Monday academy). In collaboration with the Karl-Franzens University in Graz every Monday a lecture is transmitted via life stream from the university to the premises of the KB5 building. The contents of the lectures are chosen by the university and focus on current topics such as: sustainable lifestyle, globalisation, the future of the rural regions etc. In the sense of a "university in and for the rural area" the presentations and lectures feature a generally intelligible but nevertheless high scientific level. After the former presentation there is time for a lively discussion, which is often combined with a shift in location to the gastronomy in the basement of the building. In this way the "Montagsakademie" is an informal activity contributing to the concept of lifelong learning. During the investigation period there was an average of 50 persons taking part on the "Montagsakademie" weekly from 7 p.m till about 9.30 p.m. Another informal knowledge based activity is "*Tage der Utopie*" (days of utopia): using the same technological support – the live transmission – different education centres within Austria are interlinked for one special week. During this week the "*days of utopia*" present scientists and practitioners discussing different models for the future and images for a desirable future. Some topics in 2007 were "New models for the aging society", "Present and future of the rural area", "The role of co-operation in rural areas" etc. The consciously make the rural area a subject of discussion and outline the need as well as options for action. In 2007 700 persons took part at the "Tage der Utopie". Apart from the recitations also workshops to the mentioned topics take place generating social nearness and a foundation of trust among the participating. Another informal event emphasises the agricultural sector: the "*Bioversität Österreich*" (Bio-University Austria). This is an informal education event defining itself as "think tank" and "education offensive" for the rural area. Initiated by Bio Austria the KB5 actors enable the interested public to take part on this series of events focusing on the future of bio-agriculture, the production of renewable resources, health and biological food, the return of diversity in the food production, ecological footprint within agriculture, etc. The "*bio-university Austria*" takes the form of co-operation between KB5 and Bio Austria as well as around 36 other educational providers that are interconnected via life-stream and W-LAN internet.

Apart from these informal activities with a formal framework – date, venue and event program – and a focus on a frontal knowledge transfer, the actors of KB5 emphasize also more interaction based events. Convinced of the fact that informal personal learning takes place through the sharing of knowledge – especially personal implicit knowledge – as framework for it the basement of the KB5 was arranged. The exchange of personal knowhow is dependent on face-to-face communication and requires on a foundation of trust and the willingness to share this knowledge. To enhance this climate of trust and reinforce the feeling of togetherness cultural events like concerts, cabarets, readings and vine tasting take place. The advantage of this approach by the KB5 actors is, that through familiar and accustomed activity a foundation of trust is build on which the actors can

broach the issue of "lifelong learning, e-learning, ICT etc." incrementally, which otherwise would be regarded with scepticism. This leads to the aspects of formal learning provided within the KB5 process. One formal learning opportunity is the "Linux Akademie" (Linux academy). The actors of KB5 are convinced that knowledge and innovation based labour also gains importance in rural areas and that the possibilities through ICT are still underestimated. The Linux Academy is a possibility to acquire new knowledge in IT, EDP and open source via a formal training consisting of workshops, seminars and presentations. The aim is to get a professional – a "knowledge worker" – within these fields and to support the establishment of a network with enterprises, schools and authorities within the rural area. Other possibilities of distance learning enhanced by the KB5 process are different forms of "e-learning". One is "blended learning", a form of learning which combines face-to-face contacts and the modern forms of e-learning. These offers for formal distance learning build on the conviction that a knowledge and learning based development of the rural area has to encourage and enhance its human capital on a wide range to be sustainable. During the investigation period only two persons made use of these opportunities. Some presumptions are formulated in the analysis and synthesis.

Instruments

The instruments of the process KB5 can be divided into "soft" and "hard". The "software" is the implicit, personal knowhow of the five actors, their *vision* as well as their professional competence. Openness and creativity, defined as the ability to create new ideas on the basis of familiar data and information characterises all five of them. This implies also to be open to faults: "it is necessary to make mistakes to get new solutions" (actor KB5, 2005). Their implicit knowhow as well as their expertise according to information and communication technology are the core elements of the process. Nevertheless also the "hardware" is essential to make the vision of "a university in and for the rural area" visible and feasible.

This "hardware" can be distinguished in (a) material and (b) immaterial. The (a) material infrastructure in the KB5 process is the building KB5: apart from the premises for the particular enterprises, the building offers training and schooling rooms equipped with the W-LAN internet access. In addition the building offers possibilities for cultural events (basement with gastronomy) and overnight accommodation.

The instrument "*information and communication technology*" (W-LAN network, computing, video conference system) plays a crucial role for the realization of formal and informal learning processes in the rural area. ICT works like a catalyst and transfers information and knowledge from the transmitter to the recipient. An adequate infrastructure in form of a W-LAN internet connection and the video conference system is not at the centre of attention, but means to an end to provide this range of learning opportunities. The internet, particularly the webpage of KB5 (www.kb5.at), serves also as information platform to announce future events and to evaluate past ones. The survey revealed that an exclusive focus on the instrument of ICT would be very selective regarding the reached population. Due to a KB5 actor a significant part of the rural population is not familiar to this kind of communication and information technology yet. According to this apart from the internet and the webpage also the journal "*Kirchbacher Berichte*" and the establishment of a branding is used to communicate the idea, the vision and the activities of the KB5 process. It turns out, that modern instruments as ICT do only extend but not replace classical information instruments such as newsletters, journals or other media. The immaterial infrastructure (b) consists of the *organization form* of the five actors and the *co-operations*. The five actors are organized as non-profit Ltd. and association at the same time, with a lean flexible management. The advantage of co-operations lies in the bundling of knowhow, the joined usage of infrastructure. Only through co operations with other educational providers and institutions the KB5 process was enabled. "Right from the beginning municipal and regional borders played a sub ordered role. The common interest for 'education' and 'learning' was prior for our process "(actor KB5, 2006).

Regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland"

Origin

The regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" consists of eight small regions which are located in southern East-Styria. The region extends over an area of 990 km² and amounts to almost 86.000 inhabitants (2002). The primary sector plays a key role for the economy of the region, followed by the secondary and tertiary sector. Although the number of unemployment is consistent, the rate of unemployment for women is rising. Furthermore the region is characterized by an ongoing increase in outgoing commuters of whom a vaste majority commutes to the capital Graz.

The regional development process started in 1994, within a Leader II project. The focus laid on the enhancement of agricultural as well as industry and tourism and the establishment of the branding "Steirisches Vulkanland". From 2001 on – influenced by large scale trends - the process took a new turn striving for a regional development based on two competences: development of "life skills" and gaining "economic competence". The integral regional development process should be accompanied by a regional knowledge management. All these activities base on the vision of the "Steirisches Vulkanland" as an innovative region worth living in. The main actors of the process are convinced that this aim cannot be reached only by focusing on the three core issues but through a wide-ranging learning process of the regions inhabitants.

The regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" aspires the following aims: (1) get to know the region better and recover her potentials, (2) enhance the quality of life within the region (3) aspire the regional population to further education and personal development (4) supply and establishment an authentic local economy and (5) to enhance the employment conditions and quality.

Knowledge activities

Within the exploration the regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" is defined as a formal approach, targeting consciously on the regional development through specific actions. As the region development is the subject of interest, the emphasis lies on collective learning processes on the regional level. Hummelbrunner (2002) emphasizes that the approach of collective learning proceeds from the assumption that a regional knowledge basis is more than the sum of individual learning processes and knowhow. Moreover it is a common vision for the development of the region, for which it is worthwhile to gather knowhow and share it.

According to the main actors of the regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" the implicit, non-codified knowledge of the inhabitants plays the main role. This knowledge represents the endogenous potential of the region. Two obstacles occur when dealing with it: once it is personal-bound, and second it is transparent and therefore difficult to detect. Creating transparency with regard to the identification of this region-specific knowhow is a tough challenge. The formal process "Steirisches Vulkanland" enhances this through a variety of actions. The first events were the "Zukunftswerkstätten" ("future workshops"). Two main features of the "future workshops" are the participation of the interested population and the elaboration of the main regional fields of action in a "bottom up" approach. These fields are the establishment of "life skills" and the gaining of "economic competence". The "life skills" subsume the aim to establish a culture of knowledge and learning, to nurture the regional culture as well as the living together of elderly and young people. The field "economic competence" strives to enhance the culinary potentials of the region, the discovery of the unique landscape and the potentials for tourism along with it and as a third emphasis the long tradition of handcraft in the region. Throughout three years these "future workshops" took place, involving more than 5000 inhabitants. The strength of this activity lies in the gathering of information about the region through informal and collective learning processes. Due to these fields of action apart from the proper workshops, exhibitions, information evenings etc. are organized providing region-specific information and knowhow worth knowing and learning. Summarizing this aspect of the survey informal learning processes are promoted mainly within the

regional fields of interest and mainly as unilateral knowledge transfer. The aim behind is the creation of a regional identity and a sense of regional togetherness.

Concerning formal learning the regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" functions mainly as platform, bringing the different regional education providers together and coordinating their offers. On one hand this implies the bringing-together of educational institutions and on the other hand the support of Impulse and Innovation Centres. Undertaking further education measures lies within the self-responsibility of each inhabitant. Nevertheless the process "Steirisches Vulkanland" tries to enhance their willingness making use of different instruments.

Instruments

As mentioned earlier the objective of the regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" is the establishment of an innovative region, worth living in. This region is based on its endogenous potentials, specifically on its human resource and the implicit knowhow. Hence the applied instruments focus on two aspects: (1) the gathering of this implicit individual knowhow, (2) on enhancing the individual willingness for further education and to bring in this knowledge for the further prosperous development of the region.

Due to their appearance and function the instruments are differentiated in "soft" and "hard" ones. The "software" of the regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" – as within the local process KB5 – is the implicit, personal knowhow of the main actors, their *vision* as well as their professional competence. The "hardware" which makes the significant part of the instruments can be divided into material and immaterial. Parts of the immaterial instruments are (1) the branding, (2) the webpage and (3) the knowledge management system. The common branding "Steirisches Vulkanland" plays an essential role for the establishment of the regional identity. Further on it ensures the quality of the culinary products and serves as medium to communicate the vision for the development of the region. The webpage (2) serves as platform for the inhabitants to communicate, to have access to region-specific knowledge and to inform about current events and activities. For all the activities undertaken within the regional development process "Steirisches Vulkanland" an organization platform has been invented: the regional knowledge management (3). This tool as one part of information and communication technology was invented 2001 and has its source in the evaluation of the regional development process seeking for a more efficient and clearly analysis of the activities and projects within the region. The tool has two parts: an official and an internal. The official part is the internet platform (www.vulkanland.at) were all information about projects, activities, results of studies but also other region-specific information (history, tradition etc.) is retrievable. The internal part is for the main actors only and serves as evaluation and documentation tool. The main advantages for the regional development process – striving for a learning and innovative region – are: (1) to fill the abstract term "region" with substance, (2) to show the progress within the regional development process towards a learning and innovative region, (3) to communicate learning opportunities and knowledge relevant for the region, (4) to evaluate the undertaken activities. The instrument "knowledge management" serves the purpose "to visualize, create awareness and to encourage the development of the rural region." (Gerstl, 2006)

Apart from these immaterial instruments, also material instruments are utilised. One instrument is "BISI" an activity funding master thesis and other surveys which theme regional topics and provide regional relevant knowledge. The "Vulkandland Jury" values the submitted studies and presents the results annually within a "Bisi-award" event. Through financial incentives in the first place young people should be motivated to dispute themselves with region-specific topics and questions. Another strategy is the "Innovation award", supporting innovative ideas and projects due to the two regional fields of action "life skills" and "economic competence". The advantage of this instrument is seen in the "empowering of the population": regional inhabitants are motivated to expose themselves with the regional potentials and possibilities and to elaborate sustainable strategies for its development. The budget of the "Innovation award" is also applied to support establishments of new enterprises.

Through the financial support the risk for the young entrepreneur is minimized which leads to an improved willingness to innovate.

As mentioned within the local process KB5, the communication via internet is not sufficient. Therefore also the regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" is accompanied with different mediums: articles in newsletters, publications, journals, mail circulars etc. to inform the regional population about the current news and events. Within all kinds of reporting and informing the emphasize lies on a common "wording", defined as a selection of key terms such as "life skills", "economic competence" etc. as part of the marketing. Due to Altmeyer (2002) the key elements of the collective learning process are "interaction", "communication", "transperancy" and "integration". The results of collective learning processes are a common language and the agreement on and the formation of regional competence fields. Collective learning is characterized by participatory, cooperative and collective features.

Analysis and synthesis

Knowledge represents the precondition as well as final product of learning processes. There is no generally valid answer to the question which knowledge is relevant for a rural region. In terms of "knowledge follows tasks" the demand of knowledge is adapted to the rural context of the region, taking into account historically grown structures, economic orientation, culture and tradition etc.. The essential learning processes (formal, informal and collective) can be initiated and accompanied through a variety of instruments. Among them the information and communication technology as well as co-operation attract special attention.

The informal local process KB5 plays two main roles due to learning processes: on the one hand the local KB5 process functions like a multiplier that distributes and disseminates knowledge through a variety of innovative activities. They stimulate informal learning processes and the establishment of a common basis of trust as well as a communication platform. In addition the local KB5 process provides the appropriate framework conditions for formal distance learning processes (e-learning, blended learning etc.). Instruments like the supply with information and communication technology, the co-operation with particular education providers and their personal technical skills enable the establishing of a culture of knowledge and learning. However the main actors pointed out, that it was not that difficult to motivate people to take part on informal activities but it was on formal ones. Although the technical equipment was provided the offer of e-learning and blended-learning opportunities were not really taken up. Due to the actors one reason why these lags behind, is seen in the missing political support and appreciation. Parochial thinking and competition between the municipalities are obstacles for the establishment of a learning culture and a broader willingness to continue personal further education. According to the actors another weakness is seen in the financing: the process is mainly financed privately by the five actors, which limits the possibilities.

Summing up the role of the formal regional process "Steirisches Vulkanland" regarding to „learning" and the creation of a knowledge basis, this lies in the establishment of framework conditions: regional identity and a common vision are the predictions to build up a culture of learning, knowhow and innovation. The strength of the regional development process "Steirsches Vulkanland" lies within the high degree of professionalism concerning the project management within the fields of action, the communication throughout different media and the establishment of a regional branding. Not least these successes are achieved through financial supports. The survey revealed that the willingness to share knowledge is much lower than the interest to gather new knowledge through learning processes. The main instrument to bridge this gap is the financial support. On the regional level it is difficult and nearly not realizable to generate a foundation of trust and a relational level sufficient to initiate knowledge sharing processes. Nevertheless a common identity and vision is necessary to gather openness and willingness – a culture of "learning and innovation". An obstacle for the process is the parochial politics: on one hand because municipals prefer local concerns to regional and on the other hand because the competition and envy between the municipals inhibit co-operation and the establishment of networks.

The establishment of a regional knowledge basis is depending on learning processes, taking place mainly on a local personal level. To enhance formal (distance) learning processes the technological feasibility is not enough: the establishment of framework conditions on the regional level (culture of learning, a common vision, political support etc.) as well as a local "learning culture" and opportunities will be necessary to establish learning as an everyday and lifelong activity. Only throughout the interplay of local and regional level as well as informal and formal actors the transition of the rural area to a learning and innovation based area is feasible and thus the "emancipation" of the rural due to the urban area.

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