

# Systemic constellations in theory-based evaluation – tools and experiences

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Authors:

André Martinuzzi ([andre.martinuzzi@wu.ac.at](mailto:andre.martinuzzi@wu.ac.at)) and Ursula Kopp ([ursula.kopp@wu.ac.at](mailto:ursula.kopp@wu.ac.at))

RIMAS - Research Institute for Managing Sustainability,

Vienna University of Economics and Business

Franz Kleingasse 1, A-1190 Wien

[www.sustainability.eu](http://www.sustainability.eu)

## Abstract

*In theory driven evaluations, programme theories, logic models and frameworks are used to analyse how programme activities lead to outcomes and impacts. Usually, a rather passive view is taken on the programme theory: Programmes are being carried out while impacts and effects occur. Although programme theories are very often developed in participatory processes, in most cases the actors involved into the programme are not being considered extensive. In order to get a holistic view of a programme, to understand all its mechanisms, and to be able to analyse the implicit and explicit programme theory, it is essential to reconstruct the orientation and motivation of the actors involved. Up until now a tool has been missing that can identify, visualise and consider the actors' constellation. Such a tool should be easy to use by the evaluator in a workshop setting together with those responsible for the policy, a programme, or a project. In a basic research project funded by the Austrian National Bank we adopted systemic constellations (an instrument already well established in systemic consulting and organisational development) for the use in theory-based evaluations. A toolbox was developed and the method was tested in several case studies. With this tool it is possible to take a close look at the actors in a learning oriented, theory-based evaluation, and thus consider the relevant inter linkages between the behaviour of the actors and the programme results. Thereby systemic constellation does not focus on the single causal relationships but creates a view of the whole programme as a system. Systemic constellations can be applied as a heuristic tool to rapidly give an insight into formal and informal relations between programme actors. They provide an opportunity to reveal and to visualise the implicit knowledge of the persons responsible for the programme by using images and visual metaphores. They can be comprehended more easily and often show more details than official programme documents, that sometimes lack all the relevant information or are "sugarcoated". The insights gained during constellations work can offer a basis for more actor-centred programme theories and evaluations.*

## 1. Introduction

The concept of good governance addresses how policy decisions are to be developed and implemented. The EU published a White Paper on European Governance in 2001 and declared this normative principle of governance the basis for its policy processes. The White Paper defines five principles of good governance: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Moreover, the White Paper in its ‘proposal for change’ identified the need to extend the range of policy instruments which also led to a great variety of feedback mechanisms (such as impact assessment, policy appraisals, monitoring and evaluation). Many of these approaches and tools tend to ignore the fact that interventions (such as policies, programmes and projects) are embedded in social networks and their success relies on the involvement of the actors effected by them. At the same time evaluators often complain about weak utilization of their evaluation results. Although utilization-focused evaluation has been a favoured concept for many years, today many evaluators seem to find themselves in a situation similar to that of the management consultants about 15 years ago, when systemic approaches to organizational development became famous for increasing the impact of consultants’ findings. Therefore, such an evaluation seems to suggest a scrutinization whether these systemic approaches and tools can be transferred from the corporate setting to evaluation practice. Their application could open up a perspective on the social networks underlying the programme theories while increasing the focus on utilization of evaluations.

In the course of a basic research project on behalf of the Austrian National Bank we have adapted the method of system constellation (in German “Organisationsaufstellung”) for its use in theory-based evaluation and tested it on several case studies. This paper describes the theoretical background of our work (focusing on recent trends in evaluation research and the origins of system constellation). We discuss the adaption of the method to evaluation as well as the first experiences and the potentials of this method. The authors would like to thank Judith Galla, Eckhard Störmer and Peter Kornfeind for their substantial input during the project.

## 2. Recent trends in evaluation research leading to a systemic view

Over the past years, the following shifts in evaluation research that lead towards the systemic view of policies, programmes and projects can be noticed:

- a. From studies to streams of information
- b. From logic frameworks to theories of action
- c. From logic models to systemic approaches

**a. From studies to streams of information:** Many large organisations that run programmes have experienced that after having ordered an extensive, in-depth evaluation they end up with promising results but no action, because the evaluation report or the follow-up learning and

decision-making process was finalised only after the next programme period has already been decided upon or has even already started. In addition, evaluation reports are sometimes too sophisticated and too complex to be actually used by decision makers. Rist therefore argues that in order to provide a useful basis for decisions made by managers and policy makers, there is a need for a real-time production of streams of evaluative knowledge (Rist/Stame 2006) with precise and directly usable information.

**b. From logic frameworks to theories of action:** Theory-based evaluations have become widely used in programme evaluation. With the development of logic frameworks, a tool has become available, to help both programme managers and evaluators to put the *ressources*, *activities* and *outcomes* of a programme into a chain of effects. However, Leeuw (2003: 6) argues that “*a programme logic rarely outlines the underlying mechanisms that are presumed to be responsible for those linkages*”. According to him, it is essential to understand the theory of action behind a logic framework. A theory of action is an explicit statement of how programme operations are supposed to lead to desired programme effects. They express the expected causal links between performance and outcomes and focus on the underlying theory of the programme, which can be generally based on theories of psychology, sociology or other disciplines. Only an accurate theory of action makes it possible to understand, evaluate and steer a programme.

**c. From logic models to systemic approaches:** International discussion on evaluation methods is moving from ‘mechanistically’ theory-based evaluation to systemic perspectives in evaluation. While logic frameworks and logic models have been criticized for being too simple and linear, systems-thinking approaches have been suggested as an alternative and have recently been influencing the work of many evaluators. (cf. Hummelbrunner 2000; Stave 2002; Watson 2006; Williams/Imam 2006; Cabrera et al. 2008; Dyehouse et al. 2009). Figure 2 shows an example of evaluating an action that aims to improve public participation in environmental decisions using system dynamics.

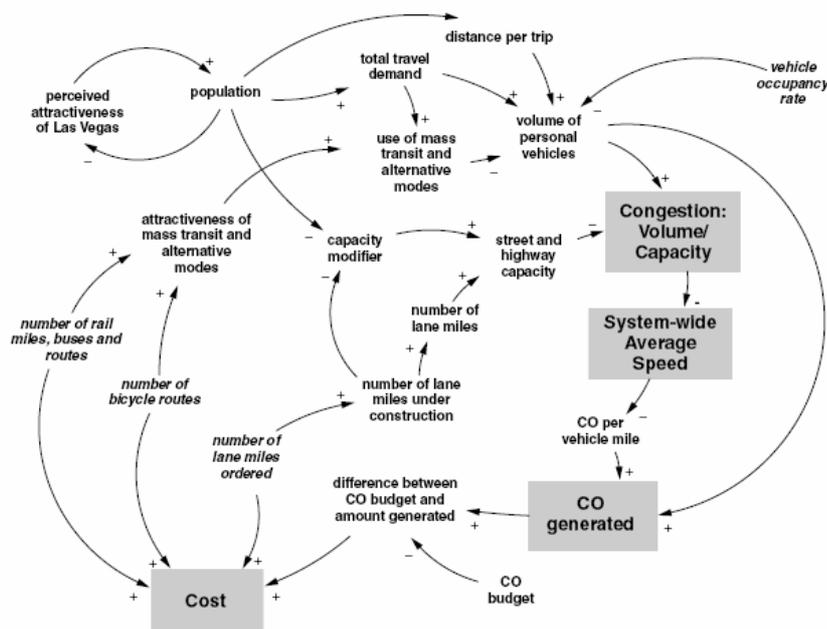


Figure 1.: Stave (2002:152) Using system dynamics to improve public participation in environmental decisions

According to our experience the systemic evaluation approaches share some common features, they:

- are part of a constructivist rather than a positivist paradigm
- follow the idea that a system is more than just the sum of its elements
- focus on feedback loops instead of linear chains of effects
- question linear causality and the possibility to steer systems
- highlight the (often implicit) benefits of disfunctionalities
- are heading for increased reflexivity, learning capacities and transformation.

Cabrera et al. (2008: 31) argue that "... system thinking balances the focus between the whole and its parts, and takes multiple perspectives into account". Actors and their mutual relationships can be visualised which makes it easier to understand the dynamics of a programme. "Once we see the relationship between structure and behaviour, we can begin to understand how systems work, what makes them to produce poor results and how to shift them into better behaviour patterns" (Meadows 2008).

### 3. The (mostly missing) actors perspective in theory-based evaluation

Although programme theories are very often developed together with program managers, they can be criticised for not considering the actors involved explicitly and and for being affected by the program itself (cf. Rogers 2000; Davies 2005; McLaughlin/Jordan 1999; Biggs/Matsaert 1999; Virtanen/Uusikylä 2004). In most cases a rather passive and unspecified view of the programme theory is taken: programs are being carried out, while impacts and effects occur. However, in order to get a holistic view of a programme, to understand all of its mechanisms and to analyse the implicit and explicit programme theory, it is essential to

reconstruct the orientation and motivation of the actors. It is not the policy, the programme or the project themselves that cause the effects, but the persons within the system, through making decisions and taking actions.

Pawson und Tilley (1997: 38) suggest that the programmes can be seen as a range of options and possibilities which can be used by actors – or not. Therefore, it is not the program that changes something, but the people embedded in the programme who create changes. Consequently, in order to explain the effects of a programme, not only the progress from intervention to the result needs to be understood, but also the thoughts, motivations, rationalities and decisions of the actors involved (Sager/Ledermann 2006: 252). Montague (1998) talks about three "Rs of performance": *resources*, *people reached* und *results*: The connection between programme inputs, activities and output (*resources*) and *results* can only work if the *people reached* – the target groups and the people working with the programme - act as kind of a bridge between them. Even if those 'bridges' are organisations, they are also run by people and hence it is important to understand their behaviour.

Chen, one of the main proponents of the development of the concept of the *theory-driven evaluation*, modified and extended his initial *conceptual framework of program theory* (Chen 2005: 16ff) by listing certain actors and contexts in which they are important. He also suggested the following actions to be taken in the context of the programme to address these actors (Chen 2005: 25 ff):

- **Implementing organizations:** *assess, enhance, and ensure its capabilities [...]. [They] allocate resources; coordinate activities; and recruit, train and supervise implementers and other staff. [...]*
- **Programme implementers:** *recruit, train, and maintain both competency and commitment[.] Programme implementers are the people responsible for delivering services to clients: counsellors, case managers, outreach workers, schoolteachers, health experts, and social workers. [...]*
- **Associate organizations/community partners:** *establish collaborations[.] Programmes often may benefit from, or even require, cooperation or collaboration between their implementing organizations and other organizations. [...]*
- **Ecological context:** *seek its support[.] Ecological context is the portion of the environment that directly interacts with the programme. [...] Micro-level contextual support comprises social, psychological, and material supports that clients need in order to allow their continued participation in intervention programmes. [...] In addition to micro-level contextual support, programme designers should consider the macro-level context of a programme; that is, its community norms, cultures, and political and economic processes. [...]*
- **Target population:** *identify, recruit, screen, serve[.] The target population [...] is the people that the program is intended to serve. [...]*

Virtanen/Uusikylä (2004: 83ff) expanded the often-applied anonymous perspective of programme logic to an actors-oriented perspective. Based on Kaufmann (1987) they distinguish between three types of programme logic: false, elaborated and socially embedded (see figure 1).

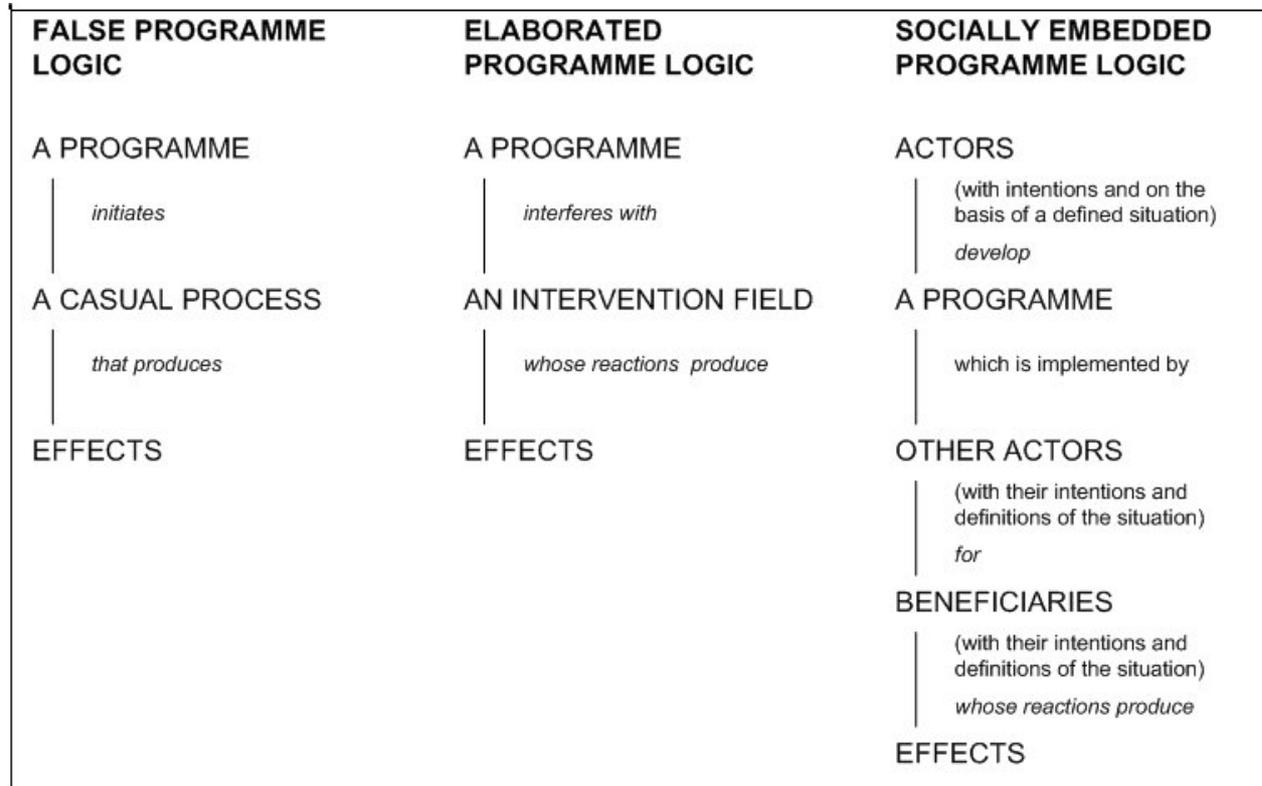


Figure 2: The false, the elaborated and the socially embedded program logic (Virtanen/Uusikylä 2004: 84f)

When programme theories pay attention to actors they can take into account that

- target groups are normally not just passive receivers of programme benefits but active people who learn and use their new knowledge. Only because of their subsequent actions a programme can have effects and reach results (cf. Pawson/Tilley 1997).
- in the course of a programme there are several side activities that take place in addition to the main intervention and when analysing how well the programme targets were reached these have also to be taken into account (cf. Chen 2005).
- success of a process of change does not depend on one person only, on the contrary - many different actors contribute to it in parallel. And, since they don't work in isolation, their activities influence each other. (cf. Davies 2005).
- actors and groups of actors have their own motivations to act and to work towards a goal (cf. Virtanen/Uusikylä 2004). This can have positive or negative effects on the success of a programme and can create unintended side effects.

Prior to considering the relevant actors as components of the logic model their relevance needs to be recognised. Therefore methods have to be developed for studying the actors, their interactions and their positioning and importance within the programme.

Such methods have not yet been elaborated in guidelines or handbooks for participatory development of programme theories and logic models (cf. W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2001; United Way of America 1996; Anderson 2005; Porteous/Sheldrick/Stewart 2002). Therefore, the practical tools for identification, visualisation and consideration of actors' constellations both, during the development of the programme theory and the evaluation process are still missing.<sup>1</sup> Such tools should be easy to use for the evaluator in a workshop setting and facilitate the involvement of those responsible for the policy, programme, or project in identifying the relevant actors and their relationships among themselves and within the programme. The information gained during such a workshop and the findings resulting from it should then be functional in the development of the programme theory.

#### 4. Origins and principles of system constellation work

System constellations are an innovative and quite recent instrument for describing relationships within a system in a spatial arrangement (Groth 2004: 171). They are based on family constellations first mentioned by Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychotherapist, and developed and used as part of family therapy by Virginia Satir (1984, 1998) in family reconstruction and family sculpting and further developed and popularized as family constellations in Germany, Switzerland and Austria by Bert Hellinger (cf. Hellinger 1994). Family constellations allow participants to see the underlying dynamics of problems and develop a new understanding, thus changing people's perceptions in order to help them to explore and solve their problems in a creative manner. The method was influenced by different therapeutical approaches, mainly by psychodrama (Moreno), hypnotherapy (Erickson), development-oriented family therapy (Satir), transaction analysis (Berne), phenomenology (Husserl) and family constellation with figurines (Schönfelder) (vgl. Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2002; Grochowiak/Castella 2002).

At the end of the 1990s several authors from other countries in Europe tried to transfer the method to organisations and other systems (cf. Weber/Gross 1998; Weber 2000; Varga von Kibéd 2000; Sparrer 2000; Grochowiak/Castella 2002; Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2002; Groth 2004; Gross 2005; Sparrer 2006; Baumgartner 2006). Although different types of systemic constellations have been developed, all approaches share the common feature of observing and analysing the interaction and relationships between actors of a system to find out if and

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<sup>1</sup> Rare exceptions are matrix and network diagrams (Davies (2005: 140ff), IT-based social network analyses (Freeman 2004), brainstorming on target groups in a workshop setting (Hunter 2006) and a broad variety of methods developed for participatory and rapid rural appraisal (Chamber 1980) combining secondary data, observation, semi-structured interviews, analytical games, stories and portraits. Most of these tools need quite a long time and a lot of data. They are difficult to use in workshop settings and do not include all important aspects (e.g. they just list target groups without considering their interactions and relationships).

how they work (Rosset 2003: 48f). Systemic constellations aim at understanding the interrelations of parts of a system in order to be able to develop new solutions and to promote change. This is done by visualising and externalising an internal picture that the client has of the relationships, orders, hierarchies, dependencies and communication patterns of the system (Grochowiak/Castella 2002: 19). This explicit and implicit knowledge is arranged by the client in space, using either persons or figurines and symbols (wooden figurines, puppets, shoes, cards on the floor etc.) as representations of parts of the system (cf. Roevens 2009:83). The client and his/her individual view of the system are in the centre of the constellation. He/she is guided by a facilitator familiar with the method.

As the first step the parts of the system are placed intuitively on the floor or on a board as the '*Anfangsbild*' (starting picture). In this phase the spatial orientation of the parts of the system such as the distances between them, the directions they are facing (e.g. towards each other or away from one another) gives important information. As the next step the representations – if persons – give feedback on how they feel in the positions they are in. In case symbols are used the person conducting the constellation takes the role of each of the parts of the system, which can help make the unconscious conscious (Gross 2005: 13). As the third step the facilitator intervenes in the system in order to develop and show possible solutions or changes. This can be done by moving persons or symbols to different places, by asking them to do or say certain things (Sparrer 2000: 99f).

When working with symbols (cf. Kohlhauser/Asländer 2005; Gross 2005; Schneider/Schneider 2006) usually only the client and the facilitator are present and they analyse the system together. Due to this confidential situation this type of constellation can be done spontaneously with little preparation and is also used in psychotherapy, coaching and in systemic management consulting (cf. Horn/Brick 2003; Roevens 2009).

In the late 1990s notably by developing the systemic organisational constellation based on family constellation and other solution-oriented therapy approaches Sparrer and Varga von Kibéd developed the theory and practice. It is also possible to include the abstracta such as 'the target', 'the obstacle', 'that, which has been forgotten' in systemic organisational constellations and 'the one' and 'the other opportunity' in decision situations in addition to the system members (cf. Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2002). This form of constellation is not meant to be a therapy but a language to describe structures (cf. Varga von Kibéd 1998; Sparrer 2000). Stey (2003: 33) suggests to go one step further and to examine whether systemic constellation can be understood as a paradigm for a methodology to express the structures of systems. The methodological elements such as externalising of the internal picture, representation and spatial arrangement could be a basic vocabulary for a look on the 'inside of social worlds'. Recently, a study with 240 test persons describing personal and figure constellations has been published by Schlötter (2005: 201). His findings suggest that randomly selected people tend to assign similar meanings to given constellations. He follows that systemic constellation can be considered as a kind of sign language. Furthermore, in a

very recent publication on constellation work in organisations Roevens (2009: 32) argues that it“... is an appropriate technique to clarify and to picture the characteristics of a system as a whole.”

Over the past years systemic constellations have found their way into a number of endeavours, from psychotherapy to consulting of enterprises, administration and policy making (cf. Lukesch 2002, Wesseler 2003, Kohlhauser/Assländer 2005; Gminder 2005; Roevens 2009). Different authors name similar advantages of constellation work (cf. Holitzka/Remmert 2000; Weber 2000; Grochowiak/Castella 2002; Horn/Brick 2003; Stey 2003):

- Constellations generate information about the system that helps understand the underlying structure and dynamics of a situation/problem.
- The visual representation of the system supports cognitive perception and systemic thinking.
- Making implicit knowledge explicit helps understand system dynamics, recognise problems and solve them.
- The dialogue-oriented and open setting helps gain additional information, new ideas and impulses in a decision making process
- Working with representations or figurines enables adoption of roles of other parts/members of the system as well as understanding one's own position in the system
- The method is fast, cheap and easy to prepare.

Constellation work can serve as a heuristic instrument to receive information, which would be more time-consuming and difficult to achieve with other established methods such as qualitative interviews, content analyses or social network analysis (cf. Freeman 2004; Groth 2004; Baumgartner 2006). Therefore, systemic constellation seems to be a useful tool to add an actor's perspective to theory-based evaluation.

## 5. Adapting systemic constellations as a tool for evaluations

Our aim was to adapt systemic constellation work as a tool for evaluations in order to focus theory based evaluations on actors, their interrelations and the whole system they constitute. Therefore, we adapted the methodology in four ways:

- a. focusing the constellation on analysis instead of change
  - b. using meaningful figurines and symbols
  - c. 2-3 clients setting up the constellation together
  - d. facilitator as a moderator and not as a therapist
- a. Whereas the main goal of systemic constellation in therapeutical settings is to support a change of perspectives and actions, our aim was to understand the relations and

underlying dynamics of the system, its informal and immaterial structures, and as a result, the implicit programme theories. To get access to this non-documented and informal information we tried to create an open-ended atmosphere, avoid formal language, and to listen carefully to what is said (following the suggestions of Leeuw 2003, based on Van der Heijden/Eden 1998). For that reason we choose symbols and figurines as representatives instead of persons.

- b. Unlike in therapeutical settings, where mostly neutral wooden figurines are used, we developed a toolbox containing a great variety of different figurines and symbols with quite emotional meanings (e.g. Santa Claus, the witch, a teddy bear, ...). This makes it possible to express actors' relationships, but also emotions, the character of a person, its characteristical behaviour, etc. By doing so the constellation is an informal and "playful" approach and the selection of figurines and symbols also bear a meaning that can be discussed with the clients.
- c. While in therapeutical settings only one client and his/her perception of the system is focused on, we tested the methodology with one, two or three programme managers setting up the constellation together. Especially the talks among the clients and the questions that came up gave an important insight into the evaluated system. Thus, it quickly becomes clear whether the members of the programme management share a similar view of the constellation and the dynamics of the actors or not. Moreover, cultural characteristics and informal information of the system are revealed. In our cases the evaluator could concentrate on the facilitation role by giving start-up information, kicking-off with an introductory question and asking a few more questions during the course of the constellation. Apart from that the constellation was kept on just by the dialogue between the clients.
- d. While in therapeutical settings the facilitator has a large influence on the selection of represented system members and can intervene directly, the evaluator in our cases focuses on the role of an initiator and facilitator. He/she initiates the process with an introductory question, invites the clients to use the prepared figurines and symbols and leads through the constellation.

## 6. First experiences in using systemic constellations in evaluations

**First experiences:** Until now we have applied systems constellation in kick-off workshops of four theory based evaluation projects (Evaluation of the EcoBusinessPlan Vienna, the Styrian Consulting Initiative for Corporate Sustainability Issues, the Austrian Environmental Subsidy Program and the Austrian Eco-Label for Products and Tourism). The following case study is taken from a systemic constellation work during the evaluation of the 'EcoBusinessPlan Vienna'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank the programme managers, Sabine Mitterer und Thomas Hruschka, for their cooperation. An extended version of the case study can be found in Galla/Kopp/Martinuzzi/Störmer (2008).

**The setting:** At the start of each workshop we carried out a narrative interview with each of the persons in the constellation by asking them to tell the history of the programme. This approach helped us to build up trust and also to fulfill the expectation of the programme managers that evaluators do ask questions. Starting right away with the constellation work would have been too unexpected and would have carried the risk of the evaluators not being taken seriously.

**The Introduction:** Contrary to the established empirical instruments (such as interviews, questionnaires) systemic constellations are unconventional, yet unknown and in need of thorough explanation. Therefore, it is essential to explain the purpose and the process prior to the constellation work. At the same time a motivating atmosphere needs to be created, which is important for the smooth running constellation work;

- to make the programme managers acquainted with the basics and the purpose of the constellation work and to motivate them to „try it“ and open up;
- to create a trustworthy and open working atmosphere in order to enable the clients to accept the process both intellectually and emotionally (they should not feel put into an exam or an interview situation);
- to enable the programme managers to express their implicit picture of the actors' constellation in their programme and not to force them into the system of relevance of the research team;
- to avoid that the constellation is reduced to a drawing of an organizational chart with figurines;
- to be able to ask questions at the end of the process in order to understand better the figurines, symbols and their meanings.

Therefore, the evaluator changed his/her role from an interviewer to a facilitator and introduced the clients into the methodology by:

- explaining the aim of the next exercise (“What is it good for?”)
- highlighting that constellation work is a serious exercise (“Can I trust the methodology?”)
- mentioning that all results are treated confidentially<sup>3</sup> (“Is it dangerous for me?”)
- putting the toolbox on the table and asking the introductory question

**The start-up sequence:** Similarly to narrative interviews it is important that the introductory question does not structure the process and that the clients can stay focused on their own relevances. Ideally, the start-up sequence catalyzes the whole constellation process and no or hardly any further action by the facilitator is needed. In our case study the introductory question was: “Please create a picture of your program in the current situation. We have prepared a variety of materials. Please use any figure or symbol and give it a meaning you find appropriate. Place the figurines and symbols onto the table until the whole picture is in

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<sup>3</sup> In the case presented here we got the permission to publish the case study as well as the picture of the constellation.

harmony for you”. In case the constellation process and the dialogue slow down, the facilitator can ask if there are any actors missing and if all the symbols are already in the right place.

**Understanding and role-taking:** For the purpose of documentation it is helpful to first ask who or what is represented by the figure/symbol and write this down on the table (covered with paper). Then the evaluators analyse the constellation picture by talking about the actors and their mutual relationships. To gain this it is essential that the system elements are not only represented on the table, but that the role of each representing symbol and figure is noted and explained. The facilitator asks the clients about each symbol/figure: „What is this person thinking about the programme/about his/her position and role in or towards the programme?“ The statements made are then written down on post-its and stuck to the corresponding actor (the size of post-its forces to make precise statements).

**Documentation:** The constellation work is best documented by audio taping (to record the dialogue among the clients for later in-depth analysis) and taking fotos from different angles. The following picture (fig. 4) and description shows the results of a 45 min constellation work done by two programme managers together.



Figure 4: An example of a systemic constellation

The centre of this constellation (see figure 4) builds a „stream of money“ and the programme management, a ship made of paper, is swimming on it. The paper ship does not point to a certain direction but rather represents a central position because it is located right in the middle of the stream of money. The chosen symbol can be interpreted that the programme management considers itself as „being on top“, but it does not have the possibility to steer the money stream, it is rather swimming with it. What is remarkable, is the direction faced by the figure representing one of the political decision makers (a dog on the top right of the picture in figure 4): this figure is turning its back on the whole program and its actors and only facing

the population (represented by little wooden figurines in the very right top of the picture in figure 4). The active consultants are arranged alongside the stream of money (where they consult individual companies and are paid by public funding) – showing that they „*work in cooperation with the programme management*“. Some of those consultants have crystals next to them – marking the very active ones. Other consultants are located in a group at the end of the money stream. A group of coloured crystals at the end of the money stream (on the very left) represent the consulted and awarded companies. Interestingly, they (the main target group of the programme) do not show any structure at all and the companies are no longer located close to „their“ consultant. Also here the spatial arrangement is remarkable: The „chain of consultants“ almost builds a wall between the programme management, the money stream and the already awarded companies.

**Using the results:** In our experience, systemic constellations can be easily used to gather input to the development of the logic model and the evaluation questions, and to add the actors' perspective to logic models.<sup>4</sup> This can be done in different ways:

- by expanding the standard logic model structure (resources, inputs, ACTORS, outputs, outcomes)
- by embedding a logic model into an actors' network
- by developing a logic model for each actor or actors' group
- by synthesizing all of them into a systemic model showing the interrelations of different actors as single logic models

## 7. Conclusions and outlook

Using systemic constellations as a tool in theory-based evaluation can help understand the programme better. As Dyehouse (2009: 188) argues „... *while logic models serve as an initial step for understanding a system, system thinking and associated models can provide a more realistic (complete and dynamic) representation of the process within a system than a logic model.*“ It is a heuristic method to visualise the social network of the programme actors from the perspective of the client – in our cases members of the program management. This helps focus on the actors of a program when developing the programme theory. Therefore relationships such as decision making processes, power relations, synergies, and (potential) conflicts can become obvious. Systemic constellation in evaluations allows to make programme managers' thoughts and implicit knowledge explicit, by creating pictures and metaphors. Such pictures are easy to understand (cf. Kearney/Hyle 2004) and show the real structure of a program, which is normally not the content of official programme documents.

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<sup>4</sup> Using systems constellations as a method of data collection might experience problems since confidentiality is promised to build trust, while transparent documentation is a key to high quality evaluations. Using systems constellations as intervention techniques in order to increase the utilization of evaluations has, in our opinion, a high potential, but might be beyond the scope of many evaluations and might resemble an organizational development project.

Thus, during the constellation the necessary information about the programme under evaluation and its actors reflected in the program theory is collected, and can have direct consequences for the evaluation design: new or different evaluation questions can arise, different or additional actors can be interviewed or other criteria for the evaluation can be developed.

Systemic constellation work shows certain similarities with the egocentric social network analysis and the rapid rural appraisals, but offers a distinct added value in comparison to both:

- While social network analysis (cf. Freeman 2004) is mostly based on quantitative data and heads for “objective evidence” (e.g. by using computer programs to turn the information into 2D or 3D pictures), systemic constellations explicitly follow a constructionist paradigm by capturing mainly qualitative information (e.g. perceptions, meanings, emotions). Consequently, it is more difficult to use as a method of data collection, but has a higher potential for new insights into system dynamics.
- Rapid rural appraisals (RRA) (Chambers 1980) aim at creating a common knowledge of a group in order to lead to joint understanding and consequently to action. Systemic constellations in evaluations aim at understanding different perceptions and are not used (by now) as intervention techniques.
- Both rapid rural appraisals and social network analyses are a lot more time consuming than systemic constellations.

Leeuw (2003: 15f) mentions that it is difficult to create an open, non-phrasology atmosphere in order to gain access to the mental maps of the participants. During systemic constellations this can work very well because the setting helps to create a playful atmosphere, it is easy-to-use and can be started quickly, without giving the participants a lot of time to develop too many doubts.

Every tool has certain **limitations** to be kept in mind when applying systems constellations for evaluations:

- **Confidentiality versus transparency:** On the one hand carrying out a systemic constellation requires confidentiality and the openness of the client to share his/her thoughts with the evaluator. On the other hand evaluation standards call for transparency and completeness of evaluation data. Therefore, it might become a challenge for the evaluator to deal with this tension. So far, we have overcome this challenge by not publishing the results of the systemic constellation, but using it as a source of information for the evaluation design (which is then documented extensively).
- **Subjective view versus “objective” evidence:** Systemic constellations show the internal picture of one or more actors involved (= clients, mostly programme managers). The picture is, therefore, a representation of an individual view and does not aim to be an objective finding or evidence. This might result in a contradiction with the need for

objective evidence of causal effects the evaluations are looking for. We tackle this challenge by using systemic constellations just as a source for conceptual considerations, but not as evidence. In addition, one could argue that other data collection methods are just as subjective (e.g. asking for school marks seems to be objective because it deals with numbers, but the reasons behind the marks also remain in the dark).

- **Strong picture versus poor picture:** A constellation picture can be very strong and, unintentionally, even change people's views. On the other hand the result can be a poor picture if the person invited to do the constellation refuses to go into details. But even a 'poor picture' has some force of expression, as it might be an indicator for "excessive evaluation anxiety" (cf. Donaldson et al. 2002). By using systemic constellations rather early in a project under evaluation this phenomenon can be identified easily.
- **Picture stability versus changing perceptions:** Systemic constellations bring insights into the actors' positions and relationships. But do these pictures remain stable over time? Right now we don't know, because we were not able to conduct any long term study. But we can assume that interviews too show only a certain picture at a certain time and their results might also change in the course of time.
- **Evidence based versus esoteric:** Sometimes constellation work (mostly in psychotherapeutic settings) is accused of being esoteric, especially when constellation facilitators talk about "the knowing field" or when "missing system elements" (as unborn children, hidden affairs, etc.) are discovered. We use the method strictly as a qualitative research method and apply only the first phases of the constellation during which the initial picture is set up and analysed – we do not go as far as to intervene into or test different solutions for a specific a problem. In this setting the picture is a representation of the individual views of the clients, just like any other representation (e.g. an estimation, a story or a graph). Compared to these other well established methods systems constellations bring up a much richer picture and therefore offer much more substantial insights.

**Further steps and research questions:** Our aim is to test and further develop systems constellation as a tool to include the actors' perspectives into theory-based evaluations. Thus, we will develop the toolbox further by deriving the symbols offered in the toolbox even more precisely from various archetypes. We plan to do more research on whether the programme itself should be in the focus of a systems constellation or whether the programmes context should be the starting point of a constellation. Finally, we plan to test the application of systemic constellations in participative multi-criteria analyses.

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