

WINNET8 on-going evaluation: Final report 12 December 2011

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Transforming regional gender relations with WINNET8 – space-sensitive dialogues and interactive learning

1. Introduction

The structural funds within the European Union can be understood as a mean to support the development of innovative and effective methods for growth and inclusion with the labour market in focus. This can be done by learning and testing methods, developed by different partners within the union. WINNET8 has a given position within this work; it is capitalisation project aiming at sharing best practices achieved in different regions. WINNET8 is financed by The European Regional Development Fund, within the framework of INTERREG IVC. This is a programme providing funding for interregional cooperation across Europe focused on innovation and the knowledge economy.

The starting point for Winnet 8 was located in time and space to February 2010 in Tällberg, the region of Dalarna, Sweden. After this initial meeting the project has constituted itself, and the work has been concentrated around the three components described in the project application; management and coordination, communication and dissemination, and exchange of experiences. The primary target group for this final report is the group of actors involved in the implementation of the project Winnet8. It involves members of the steering group, project partners, process coaches, MAG-members and others. I also hope that this report may be of interest for other actors involved in regional and local development; it may be other project managers or actors, politicians or civil servants, but also researchers and consultants working with on-going evaluation.

In this last report I will discuss some arenas for learning within the project. The aim is to reflect upon the process of learning among regions, prior to the outcomes of the project.¹ I will start with some considerations regarding the method and material and after that the

¹ This report is primarily discussing the project content, internal processes and how such processes can be understood. In an on-going work (Stenbacka forthcoming) the case WINNET8 is investigated in relation to variation theory and regional learning as well as taking account of agency-structure components.

learning process is discussed with the point of departure taken in three project arenas; Multiaction(MAG)-groups, study visits and transnational assemblies. I will also shortly discuss the role of Women's' Resource Centres within the project. Finally I conclude by offering a way to interpret this project in the context of regional learning.

2. Method and material

In this evaluation commission, the main task was to participate in the meetings of the steering group and to combine supporting and evaluating input, an on-going evaluation process.² In Sweden, on-going evaluations has been performed by researchers as well as commissioners and consultants. This has resulted in a great variety of approaches as well as variety of ways to report from the projects (TILLVÄXTVERKET 2011). A combination of supporting and evaluating should characterize the input during the project period and in the reports delivered in between the meetings. The practice and the goals that characterize on-going evaluation, that is combining evaluation and supporting during the project realisation, may be questioned as hard to practice and achieve. At the same time it is appreciated for the possibility to support during the realisation of a project instead of "only" evaluating when the project is finished. This balance can be handled in several ways. One aspect is that supportive recommendations are more common in the beginning of an assignment while the evaluating character is more pronounced towards the end. A parallel strategy may be to encourage self-reflectivity and self-evaluation among the partners involved. Thus, the reports that were delivered during the assignment, offered critical and self-reflective questions as well as some reflections on achievements and results.

Information was gathered during meetings and presentations as well as during conversations in coffee breaks and dinners. The information was kept as field notes. An important input was also various kinds of documents produced within the project. For example power point presentations during seminars, reports from study visits or other activities, book of good examples, regional action plans, to mention a few. The email list for the steering group members and the list for all members within the projects also constituted an important source for information. That said about a rich and comprehensive inflow of information, it should also be accounted for the fact that there of course were several discussions and parallel processes which were out of reach. This may not solely be an outcome of the evaluator/researcher being an "outsider" – but as a normal process within a project developing formal and informal networks and alternative communication channels.

² See TILLVÄXTVERKET (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) (2008), *Nytta med följeforskning. En vägledning för utvärdering av strukturfonderna 2007 - 2013* and EUROPEAN UNION: *Practical Handbook for Ongoing Evaluation* (2011)

WINNET8 objectives

The overall objective of the project is "to contribute to sustainable gender-equal regional growth (ROP) by reducing gender segregation, and strengthen women's position in employment and education." (Winnet8 Application form p. 14) The sub-objectives are:

- To strengthen positive actions for women, gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the work of the Regional and Structural Funds and increase Women's opportunities to participate in the programs;
- To strengthen the WINNET8s role as an actor in the implementation process of the regional and structural funds for regional growth and development with a gender perspective;
- Increase knowledge on successful strategies for reducing gender segregation in education and employment
- Contributing to an increased employment of women; sharing of best practices / best practices already developed within ROP programmes and or contribution by ERDFs Regional and Structural Funds, Interregional boarder cooperation and support from other EU programs and projects through the WINNET 8 and WINNET EUROPE network;
- Inter-regional knowledge and experience exchange with the regions in eight member countries in the EU in order to identify best practices / best practices within the chosen theme;
- To identify good practices / best practices in important areas of development from other member countries within the chosen theme;
- To highlight best practices / good practices that can be transferred to other member countries;
- Analyse regional conditions and the need for strategy and actions on the chosen theme of the Regional and Structural Funds program
- To develop regional strategy and action plans on the chosen theme. (Winnet8 Application form p. 14)

The expected outputs are concentrating around two concrete themes. The first one is about building up competence and networks, transmitting of information and knowledge, and it is materialised in different kinds of meetings, conferences, workshops, study visits etc. The second theme is consisting of certain products; a joint bench mark model for comparative analysis between regions, 1 publication with 100 good practices, 1 publication series, 1 consultant document, 9 action plans, and 10 policies for local and regional development. These outputs have been strived for during the whole period and even though there have been discussions and negotiations, the main ideas remain and these outputs have been in focus.

3. Winnet8 – arenas for learning

In this section I will discuss some arenas for learning within the project. The aim is to reflect upon learning as a process prior to the outcomes of the project. As will be evident, the arenas and activities fit well into the purpose of the INTERREG IVC: “A project builds on the exchange of experiences among partners who are ideally responsible for the development of their local and regional policies.” (INTERREG IVC homepage) To achieve an ameliorated welfare policy, on European as well as national levels, the intended strategy is to exploit and develop the experiences made within different policy contexts, and to learn from each other through interregional exchange, transfer of knowledge and best practices, and co-operation.

Concepts such as ‘the learning region’ and ‘innovative spaces’ have become important in social sciences’ understandings of private enterprising as well as the public sector involving joint programmes or projects. Within EU regional policy, the learning region is implicit referred to when promoting the INTERREG IVC-programme as “a general framework for interregional co-operation and promotion of exchanges of experience and best practice” (INTERREG IVC homepage).

The arenas where learning take place, and which are considered here are the Multi-Actor-Groups (MAG), the study visits and the transnational meetings including steering group meetings, workshops etc. Women’s resource Centres may not be defined as an arena in the project per se, but it will be discussed, as it constitutes a concept and a practice involving learning.

Multi-action groups

A significant part of the work should take place within the work of the *Multi-action groups (MAG-groups)*. They are described as ”the heart of Winnet8” (Winnet8 Newsletter #3). The MAG-groups, representing the different regions in the eight countries, consist of representatives from regional authorities, research institutes, social partners and NGOs (WINNET8a). The groups have been analysing growth policies within their own regions from a gender perspective and developed action plans, which should answer to the needs found in the previous work. The group will act as an “implementation network”, regarding the activities and projects formulated in the Action Plans.

Three aspects of the MAG-group as an arena for learning are discussed here, constitution, composition and continuity. Processes involving constitution and re-constitutions may be experienced as troublesome as they risk to delay the work. Individuals may leave the group because of differences of opinions, individuals may enter in a later stage, and strategies and goals may be reformulated and questioned. Such processes can be seen as encouraging a bottom-up perspective allowing local needs and diverse perspectives to be part of the process. At the same time it may be frustrating for the long-term participants to restart and repeat. The importance of the composition of the MAG-group should also be mentioned here. When a

network is formed, there is a risk of favouring those who share the groups' perspective; undoubtedly it can ease the work. In this case it may result in involving actors who are already "convinced", holding a shared gender perspective considering labour market changes. Some MAG-groups lack male participants which give at least two implications; firstly that it can lead to an external impression that the group is working for female interests only – while the goals of the project also affects men in a positive way, and secondly that the essence of the work is not reaching the most important channels on higher political and institutional levels, positions often hold by males.

If the MAG-group is not experiencing any obstacles within their work, it may be the case that the hard sides of the work with the implementation of the Regional Action Plans are moved ahead, the "fight" is not taken in the MAG-groups. Another question regards if the participants strive for nice meetings, thus avoiding conflicts. That may hinder the project from moving on forward as well as closing some paths for development that may seem to be contradictory. Such relations may be hard to prevent because of actors' social commitments or reluctance to jeopardise relationships, but at the same time it acknowledges the importance of creating spaces for more controversial and trial-and-error discussions.

The continuity of group composition may be another problem delaying the work with the action plans. This illuminates a recurrent problem in project implementation; because of the temporary status of projects, actors may find it more secure to leave the project before it ends, or key persons change employer or assignments and lose the possibilities to devote time to the project. However, considering regional learning in a broader sense it may not be negative: the mobility of individuals implies mobility of ideas, in this case leading to the spread of gender perspective in regional growth. To conclude, the members of the MAG-groups gain new insights in regional growth while being introduced to gender concepts.

Study visits

A second arena for exchange is the study visits, representatives of the regions MAG-groups making visits to each other following a scheme (Sweden to Portugal, Portugal and Bulgaria to Greece, Greece to Poland, Poland to Sweden, Finland to Italy, Italy to Scotland, and Scotland to Finland). The study visits allowed a concrete and embodied experience of what the project is about in each region. The experiences also stress the importance of a teacher or a guide when entering a new field. A guide may enrich the experience and add aspects to learning that otherwise would have been lost (REED 1996 in WALDENSTROM 2001:185). Learning about others also involves learning about yourself, as was stated by the Finnish participants: *"By observing how the Italian colleagues work towards gender equality the Finnish MAG learned also a lot about the gender equality structures, mentality and obstacles in Finland, too."* (WINNET8, Study Visit Summary Report 2010-2011)

Contexts can be more or less shared, and learning involves knowledge about one's own as well as others local contexts. Inherent in the reporting from Sweden visiting Portugal was the notion of not being able to relate to the own reality: *"We consider it difficult to discuss and compare the 'gender perspective' since we have such different context, living standard,*

traditions and culture.” Conditions seemed to be experienced as so different that it was not possible to relate and transfer knowledge, at the same time as the own role as transmitter is recognized: “*It is important to support the Portuguese partners in building their own Women Resource Centres.*” Such difficulties in learning may be connected to assumptions of a certain context (Clark et al 2002) for example regarding gender relations and local traditions. In such cases it can be difficult to define the gained knowledge. In other cases, differences seemed to encourage re-interpreting the own environment and finding similarities creating new paths for future development. To overcome the dilemma derived from assumptions and contextual differences, communication and dialogue are crucial; ‘It is in communication with others that assumptions supporting one’s own and others’ beliefs and judgements can be critically questioned.’ (WALDENSTROM et al 2008:242) Situations of communication and learning involve patterns of superiority and subordination, that’s why it is important to view all actors as transmitters and receivers of information. Key persons within development projects though need to confront the participating actors’ capacity to acknowledge diverse perspectives and to be aware of obstacles in this process.

Transnational assemblies

The third arena for learning to be considered is the transnational assemblies, offering steering group meetings, partnerships meetings, workshops and presentations. Local and regional differences have been recurrent themes during these meetings. Women’s participation in the labour market, range from over 70% in Sweden to less than 50% in Greece and Italy. What the countries have in common is that women are overrepresented in lower paid sectors and underrepresented in positions involving decisions. (WINNET8a, COM, 2010) VOGEL (1999) discusses the diverse welfare structures and its connections to labour markets drawing on the occurrence of clusters. In the Nordic cluster, welfare state arrangements are combined with labour market policies promoting full employment. A southern cluster combines a weak welfare state and weak labour market with strong family traditions. The family plays an important role in poverty and inequality reduction.

Other local differences are hard to measure, but are discussed during meetings and workshops within the project. One participant says: *In some regions women are entering the labour market, but they are primarily invited to the black sector.* Another obstacle may be that a region has to face many social and economic problems leading to attitudes such as “*we have more important issues on the agenda than gender*”. It is also expressed that women are met with scepticism and are not taken seriously when raising gender issues. “*Men sometimes really believe that we do not need the support. They think that they should have the support.*” Such a statement could be interpreted as favorable for women – probably men *have* problems as well – but it could also be a way to escape the hard discussion on gendered injustices by taking the role of an underdog; women are pointed at as strong and successful, but the sense of being ridiculed is there.

Local expressions of hierarchical orders are another recurrent theme. An early wish from the leading partner was to compile a list of participants and their functions. That was never

realized. The point was to ease networking, as networking was considered as a fruitful way to successfully implement the project, all participants should have the opportunity to contact a colleague in another country for support. Representatives from the lead partner told that it was hard to gather information on responsibilities and positions, probably because of unclear relations on local levels.

Another identified problem in connection to this has to do with *space for manoeuvre*. Hierarchies within the organizations affect the sharing of information and mandate to make decisions. All actors are working in a local context with power relations and bureaucracies, like the mandate to organise their work concerning for example travelling to the meetings and workshops. *“Some representatives are not informed if they can attend a meeting in another country until it is only a day or two before they should travel.”* That makes their commitment more vulnerable and insecure and it also causes confusion for other partners. Another participant says that: *“I needed the signature from about fourteen people, before I was permitted to travel here.”*

Women’s Resource Centres

The concept Women’s Resource Centres (WRC) also needs to be considered. It is a key component within the project but its position is not taken-for-granted. It should be stressed that the idea with WRCs is that they should concentrate on activities growing from local contexts and local needs. The ideology is that issues concerning women’s’ roles in local and regional development, and engagement in the labour market, should be addressed from a contextual point of view. The possibilities that lie in such a locality approach are dependent on the belief that competence is everywhere and that confidence should be built up in all regions.

An important challenge for the project is to handle the transferring of the [Swedish] idea of WRCs among different regions at the same time as the concept of WRCs is negotiated, in Sweden as well as within this project. This may not prevent a learning process; learning can take place also in environments of change and uncertainty (LUNDVALL 1992). Thus, it may not be a problem that the WRCs are put forward as a main institution for building up the needed infrastructure to promote female participation in the labour market, but it may be a problem if the openness to other alternatives is not spoken out.

The status of WRCs is a recurrent theme for discussion. Almost one year into the project, in the end of November 2010 a meeting/workshop was held in Venice, Italy. It included a workshop on how to work with WRCs as a tool, but it also offered space for discussing alternative ways to tackle the common goals. During this workshop it became clear that it did not exist one common view of the status of the WRCs in the project. One participant says: *“we are agreeing on all objectives but we cannot put on the WRC costume”*. Holding on to the perspective of letting each regions environments identify the needs (WINNET8a) is important in offering adequate prerequisites for transformation and regional growth. At the same time it shed light on the paradox in the promotion of each WRC (top down stated concept) being formed locally (bottom up initiatives including local adjustments). Whether

these conditions are optimal in reaching the goals including gender equality and regional growth, or if it brings complexity and restraints, could be addressed in future research focusing on the transformation of gender relation within a European diversity perspective. The answer to such a complexity may be formulated in terms of learning through innovation. (LUNDVALL, 1998, REES 2000:182) Lundvall states that the ability to learn is crucial for regional positive development, and more important; the ability to apply learning through innovation (LUNDVALL 1998). This means that the outcome from learning is something different from what was learned, it is a new version, in this case a “WINNET8 point two”.

4. Conclusion: Learning from insights in regional variations

The learning region is dependent upon actors who together create dialogical spaces and on actors who pay attention to the influence of local contexts; there are no simple shortcuts and blueprints, rather; regional learning involves negotiations and zigzagging in moving the project forward on local levels. In this “project movement”; mutual understanding for each other’s perspectives is necessary for achieving useful measures and relevant objectives; “In order to understand social phenomena in different countries it seems we must focus on the accounts of social actors in their ‘local’ contexts.” (CLARK et. al. 2002:268) Within this project acknowledging of different local examples and outcomes was pronounced in the first half of the project while becoming more rare as time for ending the project came closer. In the end it became more important to gather around one narrative and message.

Considering the own role as both a receiver and provider of knowledge is important; if a partner should consider themselves as receivers only it can prevent the spread of useful knowledge. The opposite, a partner who considers themselves as a provider of experiences and knowledge will have difficulties in learning. This work addresses the complexity that characterizes the transformation of knowledge among actors who are located in different cultural, political and economic settings. Project participants, representing and thus embodying different regions and countries, may share theoretical concepts and visions. The national systems as well as local socio-cultural realities on the other hand, may not “fit” into the same framework. Making the best out of such disconvergence is a complicated task to deal with for project participants, when entering the local levels.

WALDENSTROM (2001:169f, referring to Andersson 1997) distinguish dialogical space from monological space. While the latter implies static ideas and exclusion of other ideas, dialogical space involves multiple ideas, beliefs and opinions. Individual agents interact, with intentions and subjectivity and there is room for questioning and reflection. The example derived from WINNET8 illuminate the relation between dialogue and learning; projects aiming at comprising spaces for learning, and with objectives involving the creating of improved opportunities for i.e. growth or gender equality, need prosperous spaces for dialogues. Otherwise the sharing of good practices is hard to achieve; re-contextualisation need guidance and learning from innovation is an interactive practice.

The actors involved have diverse positions in the project as well as in their everyday context in institutions, authorities, organisations etc. These will relate to each other, relations involving geographical and historical context, assumptions and expectations as well as experienced practices. They will work in often un-predicted ways but there is an urgent need to recognize these relations as intervening actors in interregional development and learning processes. Self-evaluation and reflection is important in this matter. The project and its diverse arenas play an important role in the learning of regions. The web of relation which is created and maintained in such a project will lead to repercussions hard to view at the moment but important for contemporary work and future transformations.

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