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Communicative sustainability as a prerequisite to sustainable development: the LAGSUS experience

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As a result of extended field research in four countries of Africa and Asia, sponsored by Volkswagen Foundation under the title of “Language, Gender and Sustainability” (LAGSUS, 2003-2007), Communicative sustainability (CS), originally referring to the shift from an exogenous to an endogenous source of an innovative message as a prerequisite to sustainability (Bearth 2000), has been extended to denote the combined set of communicative factors that affect the adoption and implementation of development-related action. Its ramifications incorporate theorems such as the correlation between scope of negotiation and sustainability, and the inversion of language dominance relations as a factor of empowerment of local populations.

The related “language as a meta-resource” concept grew out of empirical fieldwork from 2004 to 2007, particularly among the Tura in rebel held Western Ivory Coast. It claims in substance that the optimal use of natural and human resources, including those essential for implementing the MDG, depends on strategies of optimization of communicative resources, among which small-scale investment in local language figures prominently.

The *konon* protocol of the Tura (Bearth/Fan 2006) as a prototype of a communicative meta-resource is also a procedure for the collective appropriation of innovative content as illustrated by the renewal of local commitment to the ecological concept of the EU sponsored Mont Sangbe National Park in the midst of the crisis against the background of its virtual destruction through reckless poaching and resettlement (Baya 2008a/b). Currently, the expected relaunch of the Park and its peripheral zone provides the experimental setting for a prototype of an inclusively negotiated concept defining the balance between economic needs and ecological imperatives in a context of extreme, war-induced poverty.

The institutional vacuum engendered by the crisis also provided the experimental frame for testing the value of collaborative research whose catalytic effect meant that prevailing victim mentality, apprehended as data, became subject to critical inquiry by local audiences themselves, and an eye-opener for regaining an actor perspective already during the pre-postcrisis phase, coupled with a conceptual shift from the French-plus-translation axiom to a local-language-plus-writing axiom as basis for local development initiatives.

Rather than drawing hasty generalizations from a single though pertinent case, the paper will end in proposing (i) a transdisciplinary tool for testing its relevance under varying conditions, (ii) an amendment to the relevant passage in the *kfpe guidelines* (p. 24), taking into account convergent working hypotheses from LAGSUS and similar research.

References see www.lagsus.de/publications

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