

A critical friend-review on Lithuania's country report made by the Swedish partner

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We would like to comment on the report in two different ways:

- 1) From a general perspective on the concept of a learning region: the case of City of Kaunas
- 2) From the perspective of City of Kaunas in the quality framework for R3L+

1) City of Kaunas and the concept of a learning region

The Lithuania country report is focusing solely on *the City of Kaunas* as the selected case of a learning region, indicating that the concept has not been widely used or applied to other areas or regions in Lithuania. The report is mainly focusing on the *strategic level of a learning organization*, composed of a number of partners in loose coupling to each other with no formal association format, such as a membership organization or a formal unit within the city administration. It is made clear that over a period of almost 10 years a number of efforts have been made to create and establish a network of actors as key stakeholders in the conversion of the "ordinary" city to a "learning" city. *But there is no specific list of criteria set up to make the distinction.* As a consequence there seems to be no worked out indicators that can be measured or be observed to be able to state that a significant change has been made. The quality framework developed so far within the project might be very helpful in this regard for the further development and transformation of "a normal state of affairs in the City of Kaunas" to "the learning and innovative City of Kaunas".

In the report, we note that the main focus is on networking between different organizations already engaged in learning and education in the conventional sense. Civic organizations, such as football clubs or political parties, or business and commercial companies, such as the media industry, have not been considered as key stakeholders for the transformation of Kaunas to a learning city. In our view, learning is a most natural activity for both human beings and organizations: the capacity to adapt to changing environmental, social and economic conditions is based on the ability to learn and to capitalize learning experiences for future investments that create a better fit to the environment for further survival. So we think that to create a learning capacity on both the individual level and on the organizational level, the key point is to identify and take on board the best "*learning opportunity challenges*" that exists in the common context of the potential stakeholders. In this case: The City of Kaunas. The focus should be to identify the three most important challenges for the long term survival or evolution of City of Kaunas as a high quality habitat for its current and future inhabitants. In the report, no such challenge is identified or indicated, making *the impression that learning processes should be initiated, monitored and managed just for the sake of learning.* But that is not the criteria for a *learning organization*, but perhaps the criteria for an old-fashioned *educational institution!*

Our opinion is that the crucial criteria for a learning person or a learning organization is *the motivation to accept and take a challenge*, to do experiments, to take risks, to be engaged and to be committed to a cause that has a meaning and a higher value of concern - such as Truth, Justice or Beauty - for those involved. *Learning as such* has no such intrinsic values but tends to be related to different kinds of *extrinsic* motivations, such as academic credits, higher salaries, and better chance to win a poker game or similar.

2) *The R3L+ Quality Framework applied to the City of Kaunas*

We have four sets of quality criteria in the framework with their associated indicators and empirical evidences. We will discuss the case of Kaunas in relation to these four sets of criteria with some comments that might be taken into account in both the further development of the quality framework and the further development of Kaunas as a learning city.

a) *Partnership*

To be able to get a set of partners involved and engaged in a learning region initiative, we think it is extremely important that *all involved partners share a common, long-term vision*. The vision must be challenging and generate long term motivation and commitment to accept and really take the challenge. Partners have to know WHY they should devote time, energy and other resources to this learning region initiative and in order to know this, they have to know WHAT it is all about, perhaps to avoid the next tsunami or replace a falling industry with new job opportunities, etc. First after this is made clear, then there is a shared and common interest to know HOW this can be accomplished and managed.

In the Kaunas case, *we think there should be more focus on the first Vision issues, before* discussing the Mission issues of how to set up an organization to tackle the issues involved.

b) *Participation*

Engaged partners are of course to be considered as key stakeholders. They all have to know WHO are involved. As such they constitute both the set of *problem owners and solution providers*. They have the capacity to drop the case and announce “game over”, meaning that a learning organization is not needed anymore. On the other hand they have also the capacity to define when the problem is solved or when the solution has been established as a new facility in the region, meaning that a new empty space is created for new learning region initiatives. Participation of key stakeholders means that there is a set of *responsible* people and organizations that co-create the problem specification and the criteria for good solutions within the given constraints and resources that they have been able to mobilize to their common concern.

In the Kaunas case, we need *a more precise discussion of the key stakeholders as problem owners and solution providers*. Without such a discussion the participation could turn out to be just for random meetings over a cup of coffee... What are their responsibilities and their action plans?

c) *Progress and sustainability*

Learning processes can occur on different system levels: from our biological learning mechanisms for recognition, over personal learning from a new experiment to *a double loop learning process* in an organization that use errors, misbehaviors, complaints and other “negative experiences” as input to collaborative learning and establishment of organization-wide *best-practice*.

In the Kaunas case, a further elaboration on these organizational learning processes should be made to clarify *in what way the City of Kaunas can capitalize on the learning experiences made* by people involved in the activities.

d) *Learning culture*

Gregory Bateson defines information as “a difference that makes a difference”, i.e. a second degree of change that involves not only a mental awareness of a difference between “Reality” and “Expectation” but also triggers an action as a consequence of what happens – or what does not happen – in relation to expectations. Such difference of second degree is according to our view *the driver of experimental and creative learning on both the personal and the organizational*

level. For high degree of learning, the action component must be possible to execute in order to have an active learning experience of relevance for the learning subjects in their specific contexts.

In the Kaunas case, it is important to specify the two components of such a difference: What is really *expected* by the partners involved over a three-year period and what is the *de facto real situation* that all stakeholders can agree upon as the brutal reality that they want to change?