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Summary: This paper presents an attempt of operativization of the Quality Letter of Action-Research elaborated and discussed within the framework of the WP5 during year 2007. A summary of main elements of this Quality Letter is exposed in the first section. The second section presents some recommendations and an auto-assessment tool to carry out evaluations of the processes of action-research based on the principles of the quality letter.

Resumen : Esta comunicación presenta un intento de operativización Carta de Calidad de la Investigación-Acción elaborada y discutida en el marco del WP5 durante el año 2007. Se expone en la primera sección un resumen de los principales elementos de dicha carta de calidad y en la segunda se presentan un instrumento así como una serie de recomendaciones para realizar evaluaciones de los procesos de investigación-acción en función de los principios de la carta de calidad.

Keywords: action-research, quality, auto-assessment template.

Palabras clave : investigación-acción, calidad, plantilla de autoevaluación.



PERFORMING THE CAENTI QUALITY LETTER ON ACTION-RESEARCH.

1. INTRODUCTION.

This deliverable “CAENTI Quality Letter for Action-Research favouring Territorial Governance of Sustainable Development” gathers together the results of the scientific coordination of universities and territorial actors which are members of CAENTI within the framework of WP5 “Analysis of the application of the governance principles of sustainable development to territorial action-research” during the period from March 2007 to February 2008.

WP5’s main task for this phase of the project was joint reflection on the main aspects that have influenced improvement of the quality of action-research processes, so that its processes and results favour, to the largest extent, the objectives of sustainable development by promoting territorial governance.

In the first phase, the members of WP5 have discussed the concept of ‘quality’ applied to territorial action-research projects, concluding that it lays basically in the characteristics of the participatory process generated among investigators and territorial actors as projects are implemented, particularly in the capacity that these processes have to promote collective learning dynamics and decisions among the actors based on the mutualisation and joint analysis of the information available in the medium and long terms.

Based on this idea, emphasis have been placed on determining the principal conditions (‘pillars’ in the terminology of this document) that guarantee the quality of those participatory processes as well as the main objectives to be set up and the means to be used so that these processes can be effectively performed. Given the characteristics of the CAENTI project, special attention has been given to the way in which an appropriate use of the information and communication technologies can promote these processes.

This first phase finished with the preparation of the document Proposal of an European Letter of Quality for Action-Research Favouring Territorial Governance of Sustainable Development.

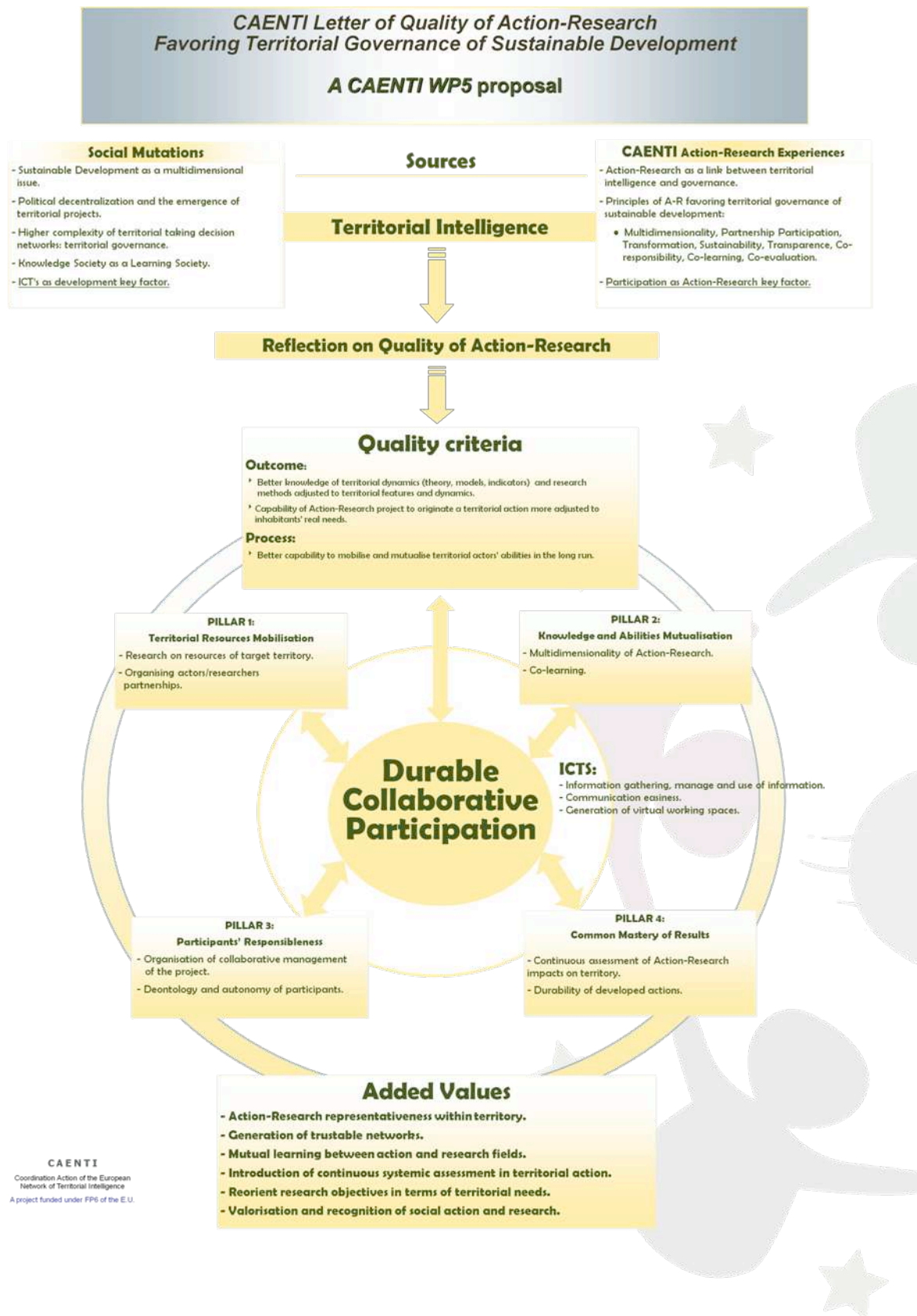
The Quality Letter has three sections:

- 1) An introduction explaining the context where reflection on action-research quality came up (the emergence of the problem of territorial governance, the development of the knowledge society, the generalization of the use of the ICTs, and the experience of the members of CAENTI, etc.).
- 2) A reminder of the principles that inspire action-research within the framework of CAENTI: Transformation, Multidimensionality, Partnership, Participation, Sustainability, Transparency, Co-responsibility, Co-evaluation, Co-learning.
- 3) The account and justification of what are considered the four pillars for the construction of a “durable collaborative participation” process:
 1. Mobilisation of the territory’s actors and resources.
 2. Mutualisation of the whole of knowledge and competences.
 3. Responsibility of participants and institutions involved.
 4. Common ownership of the results of the Action-Research.

For each of these pillars, a number of activities were proposed, whose implementation by the participants was considered necessary in order to promote quality of the process and the results of action-research projects. For each of the concerning activities, the added value that they gave to each aim, as well as the role that the ICTs might play in their development, was specified. Figure 1 sums up main elements of this proposal.



Figure 1: CAENTI Letter of Quality main dimensions.



This letter proposal was presented for validation to the group of investigators and territorial actors at a plenary meeting during the International Conference on Territorial Intelligence held in Huelva in October 2007. In this debate, the main theoretical and practical fundamentals of the quality letter were not questioned, although some substantial critical aspects arose, whose consideration was absolutely necessary with a view to preparing a final version:

- Firstly, the idea that the quality letter is a proposal which takes as its reference an ideal model of territorial action-research project was raised. However, experience proves that territorial projects usually originate in a wide range of institutional contexts, trying to respond to specific problems of the territorial actors starting from very specific situations. Hence, most real projects do not have a comprehensive nature, nor are the processes that originate them as linear as the reading of the letter may intend. Thus, the letter is a set of general guidelines and recommendations for actors and investigators to approach participatory processes from a global perspective. Its application must be oriented by the participants in action-research projects to the specific characteristics of each case.
- The issue of the application of the letter raises at least two crucial questions:
 - On the one hand, the need to implement the letter, making this set of activities and basic principles go with a methodology by means of which quality may be assessed, giving rise to the corresponding plan of improvements to feedback the process.
 - On the other hand, the appropriateness of specifying the subjects responsible for watching over the quality of action-research projects. The contributions from the audience showed the concern that an instrument thought for the teams' internal use, as a reference for self-assessment, might be used in a decontextualised way by external funders.

At the Huelva Conference, the WP5 coordination meeting agreed to organize work subgroups to bring together the CAENTI universities and the territorial actors with which they usually work (which could be members of CAENTI or not), to go deeper into the critical analysis of the quality letter and to propose the necessary contributions and comments to draw up the final version of the letter which could be finally validated by all the partners.

To make debates more operational, a self-assessment template on the quality of participatory processes in territorial action-research projects was elaborated by the wp5 leader. Each subgroup of WP5 was asked to make criticisms and contributions that they considered relevant to improve this self-assessment instrument. As an external expert, Professor Philippe Dumas of Toulon University (France) also made his contributions to this debate.

Here is shown the final version of the template, once the main aspects stated by the participants have been introduced. It also describes a territorial intelligence software available at the web site that allows setting out of a comparative analysis of the quality indicators for different projects or of the evolution of these indicators for a single project at different stages.

In order to complete the quality letter presented in Huelva, the final version of this template has been added to the original document presented at the Huelva Conference, and it has been published on Territorial Intelligence website.

2. REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE QUALITY OF THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN TERRITORIAL ACTION-RESEARCH.

This section presents an instrument which has been created to endow the main proposals of the quality letter with practical applicability.

The template has been designed as an internal assessment guide for action-research teams concerned about improving the quality of their participatory processes and, therefore, increasing the chances of success for their projects, both in terms of development and territorial governance.

Its application implies the following steps:

a) Choice of work team responsible for work quality and planning.

The first step for the application of the letter is the creation of a self-assessment team. The members of this work team must be elected by the participants in the project, trying to have the principal disciplines and sectors of the project and the different intervention levels (management, field workers, beneficiaries) well represented in its composition. It must be taken into account that the objective of watching over quality implies the use of material and human resources, especially in terms of work time, which means the need for planning the process and provide it with the necessary resources.

b) Adaptation of the template to the specific features of the action-research project.

Secondly, both the template and the quality letter take as a reference an ideal type of project where the objectives of the action and the research are proposed in a balanced way, in permanent cooperation between multidisciplinary and multisectoral teams. It has been taken for granted that the project has the appropriate



institutional support and funding resources for its implementation, at least in its first phase. These conditions are never given as such when the experience of real projects is more closely analysed. On the one hand, real projects are usually more unbalanced, because either the objective of the research or the purpose of the action prevails over the other. This balance may depend on the stage of the process (a project that starts as a research project or another that starts as an action project may end up turning into genuine action-research projects; and in fact, this is what usually happens). Sometimes, especially when the project depends on external funding, the balance depends on fund availability, according to the speciality, interests and objectives of the organization funding the project. On the other hand, the socioeconomic and institutional context where these projects are implemented is widely varied. The themes considered and the degree of comprehensiveness or multidimensionality with which they are approached may also vary considerably.

As a result, although the development of all pillars of quality is, in general, important, not all of them have the same relevance under different circumstances, nor are the added values of their performance the same. Consequently, the correct use of the template implies a second step, which is the adaptation of the template content to the project specific features by the research team.

The need for adaptation does not mean that the proposed template is less valuable; on the contrary, it allows action-research projects to be considered from a comprehensive perspective and the setting up of conditions to compare different stages of quality development either in different projects or in different stages of the same project.

3. HOW TO USE THE GRID.

From a methodological point of view, although logically not in its content, this instrument is inspired in the one used by the Spanish Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) in its Institutional Assessment programmes.

The template is made up, firstly, of a number of statements related with the achievement of activities performed in the project which are directly involved in quality improvement. The statements have been arranged around the four pillars of the quality letter and, within each of them, they have been classified in relation to the objectives to which the concerned activity contributes and to the kind of means to which each activity may be related.

The teams must show to what extent they agree with the statements included in the template, which are always written indicating that each activity has been performed correctly. They can value from 1 (“totally disagree with the statement”, therefore, the worst with respect to the project quality) to 5 (“totally agree with the statement”, therefore, the best with respect to the project quality).

The valuations can be done either jointly or individually by each member of the team, which will subsequently share and discuss them. What is important is that the final valuation reflected in the template will be the result of agreement. To make the process as objective as possible, it would be advisable to specify the elements of the judgement that have been taken into account for each assessment.

In any case, it should be made clear that this is not an instrument for quantitative but rather for qualitative analysis. As a result, the second element of the template is another box, arranged by pillars. Based on the agreed valuations and the reflections raised when discussing the degree of achievement for each activity, the main strengths and weaknesses of the project with respect to the development of each pillar and the main improvement actions agreed to feedback the quality circle should be stated in this box.

Once the self-assessment has been completed, the team may decide to submit the results of the opinion to an external committee which, based on the judgement elements or evidences considered, could contribute with an external point of view. The idea is that the instrument can feed the reflexive process of the action research teams on their own practice.

d) Computer tool for the use of the template in terms of comparison.

To make the analysis of the results easier for the self-assessment teams, an instrument on the internet has been designed, which allows the graphic results of the assessment process to be obtained online (see D46). These results are shown in a radial chart reflecting the global valuation obtained for each means within each objective in each pillar. Since the best possible score is always five, the wider the resulting chart with respect to each axis, the better the quality with respect to it; inversely, the closer the figure, the worse the quality assessment. The advantage of this simple tool is that it allows obtaining an image that shows at the same time the state of the project quality with respect to each dimension. It allows global comparisons of the evolutions in time and, provided the adaptation made of the guide is similar, also comparison of the differences in the degree of quality development in different projects. The tool is available at the CAENTI territorial intelligence portal.

4. GRID CONTENTS AND SPECIFICATIONS.



REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN ACTION-RESEARCH						
Please, cross the section considering the degree of agreement of the group with each expression. If possible, please, specify the objective elements or circumstances (evidences) that you have considered in your valuation. (5 means “we totally agree”, 1 means “we totally disagree”).						
Pillar 1. Mobilization of the territorial actors and resources.						
Objective 1.a. Investigation of the target territory’s actors and resources.						
<i>Mean 1.a.1: Compilation and analysis of existing documents and data (scientific and technical, political, legal, etc.) on the target problems.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The documentation used to define the project of action-research is sufficient (considering quantity and quality) to give a global initial vision of the target problems. It is based on coherent theoretical grounds.						
The documentation used to define the project of action-research is sufficient to give an historical perspective of the target problems.						
The diversity and quality of documentary sources allows the main dimensions of the object of action-research to be considered, and to build a theoretical framework of the links between them.						
The documentation has been jointly analyzed by all the project promoter team.						
<i>Mean 1.a.2: Account of existing bodies and actions linked to the general subject of the project. Drawing up of a map of territorial actors involved and of the logics of existing networks.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The project promoter team has updated a repertoire or map of territorial actors involved in the problems being tackled.						
The repertoire or map of territorial actors corresponds with the territorial reality and is adequately updated.						
The repertoire or map of territorial actors has been jointly analyzed by the project promoter team.						
It has been taken into account the available evaluations about past actions on the same problem.						
It has been taken into account main territorial actor’s and inhabitant’s mental representations.						
Objective 1.b. Organization of actors/researchers partnerships.						
<i>Mean 1.b.1: Organisation of work meetings with researchers and actors which can be potentially involved in the action-research at the beginning of the projects.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The project promoter team has made a wide dissemination of the project to promote the involvement of other actors and researchers that might be concerned in the project.						
The make up of the final action-research team must come from an open climate and mutual trust between the various actors involved.						
The final composition of the action-research team ensures that the sectors concerned are adequately represented.						
The final composition of the action-research team ensures that the disciplines concerned are adequately represented.						
<i>Mean 1.b.2: Work themes definition with the collaboration of all the participants.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The themes of work have been agreed by all participants involved.						
Participants have jointly developed an action-research project which is accessible for and known by all of them.						
Topics addressed take in account the responsibility of each participant and of the interest they represent.						



REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN ACTION-RESEARCH						
Please, cross the section considering the degree of agreement of the group with each expression. If possible, please, specify the objective elements or circumstances (evidences) that you have considered in your valuation. (5 means "we totally agree", 1 means "we totally disagree").						
Pillar 2. Mutualisation of the whole of competences and knowledge.						
Objective 2.a. Multidimensionality of the action-research.						
<i>Mean 2.a.1: Drawing up of a synthesis of documents and data (state of the art) accessible to all participants.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
A synthesis document containing the "state of the question" with regard to the problems being tackled has been jointly elaborated at the origin of the project.						
This synthesis document is accessible to all the participants.						
Participants have jointly read, analyzed and agreed the synthesis document.						
Elements in the territory which are not under the control of the action-research team has been well addressed.						
<i>Mean 2.a.2 Implication of several research teams of different disciplines or multidisciplinary research teams</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The final action-research group is made up of actors and researchers from different sectors and disciplines.						
Team coordination is provided by an expert in the basic thematic field of the project regardless if he/she is an actor or a researcher						
<i>Mean 2.a.3 Making up multidisciplinary diagnostics articulating quantitative and qualitative methods and considering the notion of "territory" from a global point of view (historic, geographic, economic, sociological,... dimension).</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
They have been employed quantitative and/or qualitative methods which are suitable for the purpose of the action-research.						
It has been considered the territorial dimension of the problems being dealt, i.e, has been taken into account the effects on individuals and on the territories from a global approach.						
The specificity and the level of administrative governance in a territorial level were taken into account.						
Objective 2.b. Co-learning.						
<i>Mean 2.b.1 Training and awareness-raising by researchers of territorial actors on research methods and tools.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
Territorial actors know and know how to use methods and research tools that will be used in the project.						
There have been celebrated training sessions on methods and research tools for the territorial actors who need additional training.						
<i>Mean 2.b.2 Training and awareness-raising by territorial actors of researchers on specific features of the project target territory and population.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
Researchers know the main features of the territory as well as of its population.						
There have been celebrated training sessions on the main features of the target territory and its population for researchers who need additional training.						
<i>Mean 2.b.3 Collaborative participation of researchers and territorial actors in the implementation and development of the investigation.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
There have been designed or adapted accessible and friendly computer tools for the						



REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN ACTION-RESEARCH						
Please, cross the section considering the degree of agreement of the group with each expression. If possible, please, specify the objective elements or circumstances (evidences) that you have considered in your valuation. (5 means “we totally agree”, 1 means “we totally disagree”).						
pooling of available information or for the collection of new information.						
The use of these tools is adequate: participants know them and they used them effectively.						
The use of technologies of information and communication is adequate regarding the needs of communication between participants.						
There have been designed or adapted other non computer participatory tools enhancing collaborative work.						
Participants to whom other members can address questions if necessary have been clearly identified.						
Competences and knowledge is being carried out completely and correctly: actors have appropriated the tools and researchers are aware of territorial dynamics and actor’s logics of action and constrains.						
It has been built a system of communication capable of representing to all involved actors, in a complete and coherent manner, both the philosophy of the process of development and the active contents.						
In general, the communication between participants is sufficient and adequate.						
Pillar 3. Responsibility of participants and involved institutions.						
Objective 3.a. Organization of a collaborative management of the project.						
<i>Mean 3.a.1 Creation of an evolving steering committee gathering the different active participants (researchers and actors). Organization of sub-group teams gathering researchers, involved institutions representatives and territorial actors according to the defined themes. Elaboration of a work programme that defines interim objectives and impacts on the territory.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
It was created a steering committee in which are represented the active participants of the project.						
The steering committee has established a work plan that defines intermediate objectives and impacts of the project on the territory and which is accessible to all participants.						
The steering committee meets regularly to monitor the plan.						
There have been created working subgroups formed by actors and researchers for the realization of specific tasks.						
The work subgroups have delineated work plans that define their intermediate objectives and deadlines for implementation. These work plans are accessible to all participants						
The work subgroups periodically meet to follow up on their work plans.						
The steering committee manages scientific, action and financial aspects in a well balanced manner.						
<i>Mean 3.a.2 Creation of an autonomous consultancy ethical council that guarantees a proper implementation of the project.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
It has been established a consultative group on ethical issues that ensures the correct implementation of the project.						
Genders issues are correctly addressed.						
<i>Mean 3.a.3 Evolving hierarchy of data access according to the degree of responsibility of each participant.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
It has been established an evolving hierarchical data access system on the basis of the responsibilities of each participant.						
The access to data is well correlated with the need to provide data from all territorial actors.						



REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN ACTION-RESEARCH						
Please, cross the section considering the degree of agreement of the group with each expression. If possible, please, specify the objective elements or circumstances (evidences) that you have considered in your valuation. (5 means “we totally agree”, 1 means “we totally disagree”).						
Objective 3.b. Deontology and autonomy of participants.						
<i>Mean 3.b.1 Observation of deontological principles of research in Human and Social Sciences (anonymity of surveyed individuals, observation of rules on statistical secrecy, transparency of the investigation objectives, feed-back of results to participants, and autonomy of territorial actors from the funding bodies).</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The action-research respects the anonymity of individuals.						
Action-research objectives have been jointly built, whatever modification has been jointly discussed.						
The action-research respects the rules of statistical confidentiality.						
The objectives of the action-research are transparent.						
Territorial actors and researchers have autonomy from the funding entities.						
Deliverables (publications, tools, etc.) must be validated by all participants.						
Written scientific deliverables must respect international formal rules.						
It has been created a committee of users that validates the ongoing action-research specially the results.						
<i>Mean 3.b.2 Setting up of a chart, accepted by all participants, that lays down the deontological principles, the collaborative organization of the work to be performed, the degree of autonomy of researchers and actors within the project framework with respect to the institutions for which they work, and transparent use of the results.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
It has been set up a chart establishing a set of guidelines and general orientations on the deontological principles, the collaborative organization of the work to be performed, the degree of autonomy of researchers and actors within the project framework with respect to the institutions for which they work, and transparent use of the results.						
Principles of copyright sharing have been clearly set.						
The chart has a high degree of acceptance by all participants.						
Pillar 4. Common property of the results of the Action-Research.						
Objective 4.a. Regular evaluation of the impact on the territory.						
<i>Mean 4.a.1 Implementation of a “Quality Plan”, with interim visible objectives to be achieved, allowing the regular measurement of the evolution and impact of the action-research.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
There has been established a "Quality Plan" of the action-research process.						
Main assessment indicators have been agreed from the start of the project.						
Deadlines of the Quality Plan and the financial means to perform it have been jointly negotiated.						
Eventual consequences for not respecting the quality Plan, has been discusses, agreed and explicitly reflected in the Quality plan.						
<i>Mean 4.a.2 Communication at different stages of the action-research of interim reports to all participants and the concerned population.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
The work subgroups perform reports to be used as instruments in implementing the consensus of social actors, though a process of negotiation that outlines the goals and provides a transparent account of advantages and disadvantages.						
The periodic activity reports and they are accessible to all concerned population.						
The steering committee performs periodic reports on the evolution of the project as well as on their results, and they are accessible to all concerned population.						
The steering committee carefully and transparently monitors the financial aspects of the project.						
<i>Mean 4.a.3 Observation of the results of the developed decision making toolkit on the</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in



REFLECTION GRID ABOUT THE PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS IN ACTION-RESEARCH						
Please, cross the section considering the degree of agreement of the group with each expression. If possible, please, specify the objective elements or circumstances (evidences) that you have considered in your valuation. (5 means “we totally agree”, 1 means “we totally disagree”).						
<i>decisions taken in the whole territory. Observation of the dynamics followed by the population to take ownership of the results.</i>						which valuation is based
It has been established a system for monitoring the impact of the action-research on the territory.						
The unwanted aspects and the added valued of the project have been anticipated.						
Considering main population’s needs impacts, general results of the territorial project are positive.						
Considering the empowerment of population, general results of the territorial project are positive.						
The research-action project contributes to increase scientific knowledge.						
Objective 4.b. Durability of the implemented actions.						
<i>Mean 4.b.1 Implementation of a specific work group in charge of preparing the continuation of the action-research, both in terms of monitoring the developed actions and in terms of developing new action-research projects, on the basis of the work dynamic established within the work sub-groups.</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Aspects in which valuation is based
There has been constituted a specific work group in charge of preparing the continuation of the action-research.						
A data base to be used in other territorial projects in the medium and long term has been built.						



CONCLUSIONS and AUTOASSESSMENT

Pillar 1. Mobilization of the territorial actors and resources.				
Main Strengths	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the better performance)</i>			
Positive effects of these Strengths	<i>Describe</i>			
Main Weakness	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the worst performance)</i>			
Negative effects of these Weakness	<i>Describe</i>			
Improvement Actions	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Result indicators</i>
<i>Name Action 1. 1</i>				
<i>Name Action 1. 2</i>				
<i>Name Action 1. 3</i>				
....				
Pillar 2. Mutualisation of the whole of competences and knowledge.				
Main Strengths	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the better performance)</i>			
Positive effects of these Strengths	<i>Describe</i>			
Main Weakness	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the worst performance)</i>			
Negative effects of these Weakness	<i>Describe</i>			
Improvement Actions	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Result indicators</i>
<i>Name Action 2. 1</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 2</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 3</i>				
....				
Pillar 3. Responsibility of participants and involved institutions.				
Main Strengths	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the better performance)</i>			



Positive effects of these Strengths	<i>Describe</i>			
Main Weakness	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the worst performance)</i>			
Negative effects of these Weakness	<i>Describe</i>			
Improvement Actions	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Result indicators</i>
<i>Name Action 2. 1</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 2</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 3</i>				
....				
Pillar 4. Common property of the results of the Action-Research.				
Main Strengths	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the better performance)</i>			
Positive effects of these Strengths	<i>Describe</i>			
Main Weakness	<i>(Name those aspects of the project which have the worst performance)</i>			
Negative effects of these Weakness	<i>Describe</i>			
Improvement Actions	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Responsible</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Result indicators</i>
<i>Name Action 2. 1</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 2</i>				
<i>Name Action 2. 3</i>				
....				



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